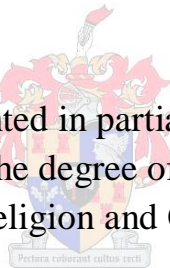


‘GREEN SPIRITUALITY’: TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL ETHIC IN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND PRAXIS

by

Francine Becker

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Supervisor: Prof. Johan H. Cilliers

Co-supervisor: Prof. Wilhelm Gräb

Faculty of Theology

Department of Practical Theology

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DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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ABSTRACT

Green spirituality as found in popular media such as films can be used to develop an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis and serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis. By examining the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki, ecological and spiritual themes can be drawn from the text and applied as contemporary examples of 'green spirituality'.

In the first chapter I articulate and describe the research problem, whether green spirituality is found in popular media and if so, could it be used to develop an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis. This discussion includes the aims of the study and the description of the research methodology used in the study, as well as the delimitations of the study.

In the second chapter I define some of the key terms: spirituality, green spirituality, ecological crisis, ecological ethic, and present a brief overview of the theoretical concepts, ecofeminism, and deep ecology, within whose context this study takes place. This chapter will include the literature survey that informs this study.

In the third chapter I present the data, namely the green spirituality found in media such as the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki. The films are summarised and evaluated according to the green spirituality and ecological themes presented. Four signifiers are identified to be present in the films: visual, cognitive, spiritual and communal.

In the fourth chapter I present my interpretation of the data, as informed by scholarly sources, and also describe the relevance of the data in the faith traditions and the positions taken by faith traditions with regards to the ecological crisis. I also present some practical suggestions for responses in theological praxis. In chapter five I present my conclusion.

OPSOMMING

‘Groen spiritualiteit’, soos gevind in populêre media soos films kan gebruik word om ‘n ekologiese etiek in teologiese refleksie en praxis te ontwikkel en kan dien as ‘n platform in ‘n multi-sektorale en multi-fokus reaksie op die ekologiese krisis. Deur die films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, en die films van Hayao Miyazaki te ondersoek, kan ekologiese en spirituele temas onderskei word en toegepas word as kontemporêre voorbeelde van ‘groen spiritualiteit’.

In die eerste hoofstuk noem en beskryf ek die navorsingsprobleem, naamlik die moontlikheid om groen spiritualiteit wat te vinde is in die populêre media soos films, te gebruik om ‘n ekologiese etiek te ontwikkel in teologiese refleksie en praxis. Hierdie bespreking sluit die doelwitte en beperkings van die studie in en beskryf die navorsingsmetodologie wat gebruik word.

In die tweede hoofstuk gee ek ‘n paar definisies van sleutel begrippe: spiritualiteit, groen spiritualiteit, ekologiese krisis, ekologiese etiek, sowel as ‘n kort oorsig van die teoretiese konsepte soos ekofeminisme en ‘deep ecology’ waarin die studie omraam. Hier sluit ek in wat ek verstaan onder die sleutel konsepte om die studie te definieër binne die raamwerk van die navorsing. Hierdie hoofstuk sluit die literatuur oorsig in.

In die derde hoofstuk gee ek die data, naamlik die groen spiritualiteit gevind in populêre media soos die films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, en die films van Hayao Miyazaki. Die films word opgesom en ge-evalueer volgens die groen spiritualiteit en ekologiese temas teenwoordig.

In die vierde hoofstuk beskryf ek my interpretasie van die data, soos voorgestel ook deur geleerde bronne en die geloofstradisies. Ek maak ook ‘n paar praktiese voorstelle in teologiese praxis. In hoofstuk vyf gee ek my gevolgtrekking.

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CHAPTER I

1.1 INTRODUCTION

People are quick to recognise disasters such as the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Centre in New York or the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, but the dying of a forest or the death of a lake tends to fall beneath the threshold of attention of most. The ecological crisis the Earth is facing should be clear to most people today, whether through education or experience, and yet we do not seem to realise it “for sure” or be able to change. What is happening on Earth that should not be and what should be done differently?

Deeply concerned people from diverse backgrounds have offered answers to this question as well as plans for action. These people are located in diverse movements and fields: ecofeminism, deep ecology, liberation theology, eco-theology and in the faith traditions of the world, and I identify their concerns as emerging from the deepest dimensions of human beings, in the ‘ultimate values’ that give meaning to our lives and being articulated as ‘green spirituality’.

The green spirituality that I am identifying is to be found in the writings of theologians, philosophers, environmentalists, and feminists amongst others; however there are other sources as well. The visual media, specifically films, can also serve as sources for green spirituality. In this study I endeavour to identify the spiritual and

ecological signifiers¹ present in the media, specifically in the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki. I am examining these films because I believe that the media have opened discussion on spiritual topics as never before. The faith traditions have not addressed this reality in a practical way, especially not in terms of the ecological crisis.

To address the ecological crisis many resources are needed and green spirituality can help to develop a comprehensive reasoned view about how we ought to be dealing with nature: an “ecological ethic”. This study seeks to inform theological reflection and praxis in developing such an ecological ethic in the belief that embracing such an ethic would serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis.

In this study I will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- What ‘green spirituality’ is presented in the media; and
- what relevance does such a spirituality have in developing an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis; and
- can it serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis?

Through an evaluation and critical analysis of the literature and the data (the films) I want to present and analyse the nature and prevalence of green spirituality in the media and to evaluate the relevance of such spirituality as laid out in the research

¹ The term ‘signifier’ is used in semiotics, the study of meaning, and denotes a sound, image or word that has meaning. Following Metz (1982:4) I am assuming that all films locate their signifiers on the primary imaginary of visual images.

question. I will conduct this study through a qualitative descriptive and hermeneutical study of the literature and of the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki. To interpret the data I will draw on theories in the fields of ecology, ethics, theology, feminism and film analysis. Once the data have been interpreted I will use theological concepts to identify and determine strategies of action in reflection and praxis.

1.2 THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1.2.1 The main problem

Is green spirituality present in the media (the films); if so, what does this green spirituality entail; what relevance does such a spirituality have in developing an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis; and can this serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis?

1.2.2 The key questions

- What is the nature and content of green spirituality presented in academic literature and in visual media, with reference to the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki?
- Does green spirituality have any significance for people today?
- Can green spirituality serve to develop an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis?

- Does the acknowledgment of green spirituality require a fundamental paradigm shift in faith communities, and if so, what would this be?
- Can an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis?

1.2.3 The hypotheses

- Embracing green spirituality can develop an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis and serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis.
- A fundamental paradigm shift is needed to accommodate such a green spirituality and for it to be understood as meaningful by people.
- The presence of green spirituality in the media such as the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki, can be seen as a significant contribution to such a paradigm shift.

1.3. THE RESEARCH DESIGN

1.3.1 The structure

The study will follow the principles of practical theology in that it examines a present situation in the form of a literature survey and a critical analysis of the data (the films), and then formulates a hermeneutical theory of what should be, and culminates in developing a practical response or theory for praxis.

According to Smith (2008:203) research in practical theology stands in contrast to biblical studies and systematic theology in that it refers to the application of theology to life and ministry. A practical theology seeks to apply theological reflection to solve real-life problems. Its point of departure is a problem in the real world, that is, a real-life situation that is not as it should be. Smith (2008:203) refers to Cowan (2000)² who distinguishes between contemplative and transformative approaches to theology where the former are content to reflect on the world as it really is, but the latter are determined to change the world as it should be.

Following Ackerman (in Ruether 1996:125) I want to expand the field of practical theology in its acts of celebrating, teaching, preaching, ministering, counselling and praying traditionally, to include an ecofeminist practical theology. An ecofeminist practical theology in South Africa is concerned with actions of women who seek healing, liberation and well-being for themselves, their families, and their communities in restored environments. The motivation for such actions and concerns I understand as emerging from the deepest dimensions of human beings, in the 'ultimate values' that give meaning to our lives and being articulated as 'green spirituality'. Ackerman calls this concern and action an Earth-healing praxis, which is directed at restoring relationships between ourselves and all created life, and is infused by a spirituality which reverences the sacredness of all creation.

² The model used comes from Michael Cowan (2000) of the Institute for Ministry at Loyola University, *Introduction to practical theology*, [accessed from www.loyno.edu, 2006-06-02].

1.4. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.4.1 The data

This will include the literature survey and the descriptive analysis of the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki, through which I will attempt to illustrate and contextualise the research.

1.4.2 The tools/ methodologies

For the purposes of this study I will adapt Cowan's methodology (as described by Smith 2008:226) in a qualitative approach and include the four levels of engagement necessary in practical theological research:

1. Descriptive (correlational) method: This evaluates the relationship between 'the world as it is' and 'the world as it should be'. By means of this method the researcher seeks an accurate understanding of the present situation and the preferred scenario. The situational and empirical analysis of the present situation is obtained through the literature and the analysis of the films.

2. Hermeneutical (interpretive) method: This requires the ability to interpret the world and traditions by the researcher and can be done by a hermeneutical analysis of the literature and the data. Through such an evaluation the researcher applies hermeneutical experience (Osmer 2008:23), that aspect of interpretive activity that is open to encountering and learning something genuinely new.

3. Critical (normative) method: This requires the evaluation of inherent understandings that guide our interpretations and actions. This study is informed by

the researcher's theoretical grounding in biological science and gender studies; as well as in theology.

4. Transformative (pragmatic) method: This has the purpose of bringing harmony in the world through suggestions for action. The purpose of practical theology is to present suggestions for action, therefore this study will be completed by in the practical application of the results and conclusions.

None of these methods or tasks stands alone as each influences the other in a dialectic spiral. Osmer (2008:16) even expands this image to a “web”, including all living components. Therefore all components forming this “web of understanding” need to be examined.

1.5 THE ELUCIDATION OF THE PROBLEM

- a) Point of departure: The argument I am presenting is based on the premise that there is an ecological crisis and that urgent action needs to be taken. This premise will not be argued or discussed in this paper.
- b) Assumptions:
 - i) I will engage with the topic with the understanding that the world has always had some or other form of moral values and norms; however these have not always been to the advantage of the voiceless and disempowered.
 - ii) I will work on the premise that there is a dynamic interaction between media and user and that this interaction flows both ways.
- c) Objective: The choice of subject is grounded in my passion to respond to the reality of the ecological crisis. The ecological crisis is a subject that I cannot argue and reflect on without a deep emotional and moral involvement. I can

therefore not pretend to have a neutral point of departure in my work but realise that I must still retain an academic perspective. This study is an attempt to join scholarly research with engaged personal reflection.

1.6 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- a) Confessional: As the researcher is Christian, this faith tradition will be dominant in the discussion. However, a general overview of the green spirituality present in a selection of traditions will be presented to inform the discussion.
- b) Genre: I will not restrict the choice of films to a specific genre but will only consider the following films: *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki. These films were named by James Cameron³, the producer of *Avatar*, and both he and Hayao Miyazaki identified themselves as having a concern for the environment.
- c) Geographical: I will not restrict the discussion to a specific global location as the mass media have a global reach.

³ Films such as *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest* and *Dances with Wolves* have an easily understandable message of ‘something out there’, “that maybe in the enjoying of it, it makes you think a little about the way you interact with nature and your fellow man” (James Cameron, writer and producer of *Avatar*, made this statement at the Comicon 2009, as reported in the Boston Herald, Press Associated July, 24, 2009.) news.bostonherald.com/.../20090724james_cameron_wows_comic_con_with_3-d_avatar/ [accessed 12/06/2010]

CHAPTER II

In the second chapter I will offer some definitions of the key terms, as well as a brief overview of the concepts within whose context this study takes place. In order to situate the study I define and describe the terms: spirituality; green spirituality; ecological crisis; ecological ethic; ecofeminism; deep ecology; and eco-theology.

2.1 DEFINING THE KEY TERMS

In this chapter I am introducing the key terms and discussing the concepts used in this study as summarised from the literature survey which formed the basis of my research. These terms are pivotal to understanding the discussion presented in this study. It is necessary to discuss the theoretical concepts on which this study is based as it departs from the conventional structure where the argument is located within a confessional tradition. A number of the terms used also have more than one meaning depending on one's point of departure. The assumptions that undergird my thinking and approach are foundational truths on which I build my study and may clash with conventional confessionally grounded theological assumptions. By stating my point of departure I am attempting to alert readers to my personal bias and facilitate following my train of thought, thereby enabling a better understanding.

2.1.1 Spirituality

2.1.1.1 What is meant by spirituality?

In order to understand the nature of green spirituality as presented in the media, it is necessary to define what is meant when I refer to spirituality. A definition of spirituality is difficult, therefore two approaches are characteristic: the deductive one which is strongly theologically oriented, and the inductive one, starting from lived

experience. I will be using the second approach as developed by Kourie and Waaijman in De Villiers, Kourie, and Lombaard (2006). This approach is located within the Christian tradition but is broad enough to cover a wider sphere. Due to the popular use of the term its use can mean escapism, inactivity, irrelevance or on the other hand, deep, mature revelation and reflection. Often people have a negative understanding of the term, as in 'paganism'. I understand, as does Kourie (in De Villiers *et al.* 2006:22), spirituality as being found in the wider context of the deepest dimension of a human person, in the 'ultimate values' that give meaning to our lives. However, I also see spirituality being found in a much more superficial and fragmented way, as in the mass media such as the films.

To be able to get a grasp of the difficult concept of spirituality it is helpful to follow Waaijman (in De Villiers *et al.* 2006:5) in his phenomenological approach. He describes three basic forms: 1) the well-established schools of spirituality; 2) primordial spiritualities such as lay spirituality, indigenous spirituality and spirituality in secular contexts; and 3) counter-movements. The schools of spirituality include the forms of spirituality that most people would recognise in the established religious traditions. Waaijman includes in his evaluation of Christian schools of spirituality the monastic system, the Benedictine centuries, the regular canons, the mendicant orders, the Jesuits, the Salesians, Reformational spirituality, Orthodox spirituality and a long list of others. These all have a founding or source experience and a circle of pupils who live according to a certain value system. The large number of these schools of thought underlines the significance of spirituality as an expression of faith in Christianity and this importance can be expanded to include the spiritual traditions in other faiths as well.

Primordial spirituality does not belong to a school. The different expressions of this form are closely related to the lived reality of its practitioners. Again the sheer

diversity of this group is apparent in the different sub-forms, namely: lay spirituality developed in the world of the extended family, indigenous spirituality not yet transformed by dominant theological traditions, and secular spirituality, emancipated from religious dominance as in the New or Alternative Spiritualities (Waaïjman *ibid.*:8; Harper and Morehead 2005:21).

Waaïjman (*ibid.*:11) divides spiritual counter-movements into three groups:

1) Liminal spirituality: This type of spirituality is based on the concept of rites of passage. Every rite of passage involves three phases: separation, indeterminacy where the person is in a liminal state, and reintegration. In the liminal phase the person is in a state of extreme discomfort, physically and emotionally and yet is also experiencing creativity, insight and naturalness. The person goes through the process of being valued and devalued; of meaning and meaninglessness. These phases can be seen in the films *Avatar* and *Dances with Wolves*, to be discussed in Chapter III. In this category also fits the spirituality of the loneliness of living in our modern society.

2) Inferior spirituality: This type of spirituality includes those who are the poor, the mentally and physically outcast, the most devalued and debased of people, the so-called primitive. Historically this 'inferiority' was found in early Christian communities and in early Hasidic groups.

3) Marginal spirituality: Marginality is marked by a double loyalty as in the case of second-generation immigrants, recognised artists, and acclaimed philosophers. Those who practise this type of spirituality can offer criticism from the outside but have to live in the ambivalence of their position.

Moving away from the phenomenological description of spirituality, it is necessary to define what the experience of spirituality involves. From a Christian point of

departure, Waaijman again can offer three elements (*ibid*:13). He describes spirituality as involving:

- 1) A relational process between God and human being, where the God/human relationship fluctuates between the two poles and leads to a wholeness and maturity, allowing love to emerge on all levels of existence;
- 2) A gradual process defined by an interlocking reciprocity as in an embrace, an action that is both active and passive;
- 3) A transformation where the whole person is absorbed by the relational process and from this flows a unique dissonance.

Waaijman's description underlines the dynamic and interactive nature of spirituality. It is as much a process as a state of being.

2.1.1.2 Spirituality and faith traditions

According to Ruether (1996:46) spirituality is not necessarily linked to a specific faith tradition. She identifies deep spiritual traditions in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, but states that spirituality can be experienced in totally different contexts as well. Kourie (in De Villiers *et al.* 2006:24) points out that spirituality is often seen as being characterised by relationships with things, nature, other people and the Ultimate (in whatever form this is understood), rather than being linked to religious practices. She does not see this as a negative aspect but rather in a positive sense where "[a]n understanding of spirituality which effects aesthetic appreciation, and a deep interior conviction of the connectedness of all things, will perhaps bring women and men back to the realities of a life lived for others, and away from enslavement to material things and self-centredness."

The postmodern turn to spirituality is identified by Kourie (*ibid*:27) as part of the transition from ‘monocultural, Eurocentric’ churches to a ‘multicultural, polycentric global Church’. This paradigm shift allows an openness to other cultural expressions of spirituality. Former attitudes of isolation, hostility, domination and colonialism can be replaced with respect and sharing. Another reason for the turn could be the quest for authenticity prevalent in modern society, as discussed by Taylor (2007). Many values and beliefs within orthodox religions are being seriously questioned. In certain cases this has led to a move to more conservative communities but also has led to a shift to the heterodox ‘believing without belonging’ group (Taylor 2007:518).

In terms of theological study, spirituality is interdisciplinary and descriptive-critical as a field of study. Kourie (in De Villiers *et al.* 2006:33) believes that intellectual interpretation is secondary to intuitive understanding and a phenomenological approach opposed to a confessional approach allows an open mind.

2.1.2 Green Spirituality

The use of the phrase ‘green spirituality’ denotes my intention to link spirituality and nature, as denoted by ‘green’, and to identify this form of spirituality in the literature and the films. The term ‘green spirituality’ allows a broad frame of reference and keeps it grounded in the practical application of this work.

I want to suggest that many films of diverse genres articulate an understanding of a multi-layered reality. In the films I considered and for the purposes of this study, in spite of the diversity in articulating this reality, I identify green spirituality by using four types of signifiers: visual, cognitive, spiritual and communal, to be discussed in Chapter III. These can be used to describe a spirituality that accentuates personal experience, theological pluralism and spiritual growth rather than attachment to an

established religious normality. Here I concur with Bron Taylor (2001:176) who states that “[s]pirituality need not be seen as opposing religious traditions. It is often seen as the inner truth to which they all point. Spirituality can be viewed as a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions.” He goes on to ask “What counts as religion?” and borrows from David Chidester who defines religion as “that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms” (1987:4). Films that use a multi-layered perspective of the cosmos often draw on a host of ancient religious and philosophical traditions, both Eastern and Western, as well as concepts from ecofeminism, deep ecology and other environmental movements.

The value of identifying such green spirituality is that it can serve as a means whereby people are able to find resources to challenge processes in society such as the economist market model and environmental degradation. Green spirituality allows this by celebrating nature and finally countering the elevation of the word over the image by the Reformers, who believed the beautiful things of nature, while not in any sense evil, could mislead one who paid them too much attention, thus blurring the distinction between Creator and creation (Jensen 2004:61). By exploring what is offered in the media and elsewhere as green spirituality, people can be motivated to live responsibly on the Earth and can join communities of resistance. Ruether (1996:46) relates the testimony of an indigenous woman, Esther: “Spirituality is related to self-discovery, rediscovering the wealth we have been taught to deny... the relationship between humanity and the Earth.” She goes on to say that “spirituality affirms the individual in the context of the community. Spirituality in the context of cultural diversity shapes the way in which we see the world, remembering the teachings of our ancestors, and recovering the equilibrium between cosmos and humanity.”

Spirituality can be found in unexpected places and Van Schalkwyk (2008:6-23) identifies a largely unformulated ecofeminist spirituality movement in Southern Africa: women identifying with the body of God through their own bodies (Eco-Shrine); women's ecological spirituality as a woven basket which keeps communities and ecosystems together (Water for Food); the Sustainability Institute; women identifying with the Spirit of Creation (the Bohareng Centre). This spirituality is not other-worldly, private and abstract, it takes place in the experiences of communal struggle for survival amidst grinding poverty and marginalisation. It certainly does not separate social action from contemplation. However, caution is needed as the appropriation of indigenous and other spiritualities can involve not only ethical but also political and hermeneutical failures. Commercial adaptations and academic interpretations of spiritual knowledge and practice are often plainly inaccurate. According to Jocks in Hackett (2003:485) this can be akin to cultural genocide. I will discuss this later in Chapter IV.

The use of the term 'nature' is intentional, to avoid a distancing from what surrounds us and as a device to overcome the divide between ecology (the natural systems on Earth) and theology (the belief systems on Earth), and to find common ground. Gottlieb (2006:ix) tries to clarify the term 'nature' by defining it as the Earth's system of living beings and the support systems for them. Human beings also fit into this natural system but because of our tendency to destabilise and destroy; to insert technology; to question what we do; we occupy a unique position.

I understand the connection between spirituality and nature as the recognition that to be ecologically educated and aware is to "walk alone in a world of wounds", (a famous quotation by Aldo Leopold, in Meine and Knight (1999:265)). The similarity between the lifeworld experienced by a key figure in the creation of modern environmental ethics, and the agonies expressed by many religious figures attempting

to live their lives faithfully is striking. Gottlieb (2006:17) examines this similarity in the context of pain and suffering in the world. We are surrounded on a daily basis by a surfeit of ‘bad’ news – oil spills, global warming, poisoned water – and most of us try to ignore it all. However, according to Gottlieb, this is the root of the ecological crisis: avoidance and denial. I agree with him that, as painful and uncomfortable as it may be, if “we truly give up denial and avoidance, then our sense of sacred on the earth will have to include pain and loss.” He goes on to say: “It is in God that we find the source of our strength to resist, and in the actions of the worldwide environmental movement we find (even if most environmentalists wouldn’t put it this way) the sacred.” Considering the immensity of the ecological crisis it requires a certain kind of faith to believe one’s actions make a difference.

2.1.3 What About “New Age”?

Certain elements that I identify as green spirituality are present in the New Age movement. Unfortunately New Age has multiple meanings and is conflated with the wider understanding of New and Alternative Spiritualities (Harper and Morehead 2005). “New Age” is a predominantly Northern Atlantic phenomenon and cannot be extrapolated to cover the rest of the world. However, it is important to note that the “New Age” and New and Alternative Spiritualities represent many elements of our modern society and therefore I will briefly describe and discuss this complex subject, based on Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007).

Taylor (2007:473) proposes that something happened in the last half-century that profoundly altered the conditions of belief in our societies (in his discourse these are North Atlantic societies). The modern age is based on individualism, but what has happened is there has been a development of ‘expressive’ individualism as well as moral/spiritual and instrumental individualisms. The development of individualism

has been a phenomenon since the Romantic period in the late 18th century when an ethic of authenticity⁴ became the trend amongst elites. This happened as a reaction against the perceived ‘disenchantment of the world’ through industrialisation and modernisation and the erosion of traditional values, leaving a universe that is dull, routine, flat, driven by rules rather than thoughts (Taylor 2007:305). Taylor links the Reformation and a general turning towards ‘reform’ (as in the sense of making the world a more ‘civilised’ and devout place) to the ‘disenchantment’⁵, (derived from Max Weber) of the world. Reform was a unique drive to make over society to higher standards of civility and control and this demand, felt with increasing power during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, was that not just an elite, but far as possible all the faithful, live up to the demands of the Gospel (2007:104). Taylor argues that this change was crucial to the demise of the old enchanted cosmos, and to the creation of a viable alternative in exclusive humanism (2007:63).

The Weberian outlook is bleak, and Taylor puts it aside to find a far more hopeful vision in the sociology of Emile Durkheim. In contrast to Weber, Durkheim saw the forms of society as containing not impersonal functions but deeply implanted sacred practices, and he saw religion rooted in the roles and rules of modern social systems resisting alienation. After the passing of the ‘paleo-Durkheimian’ *ancien regime* where religion was part of the cosmic order and largely coercive, Taylor identifies a ‘neo-Durkheimian’ form of religion where religion is part of political identity or a civilisational-moral way of life (2007:603). The neo-Durkheimian dispensation saw people entering denominations of their choice, but also connected them to the broader more socio-religious structure and as well as to a political entity with a providential role to play (2007:486). In this neo-Durkheimian society people were no longer open

⁴ Authenticity means an understanding of life that each of us have a way of realising our humanity and that it is important to find this (Taylor 2007:475).

⁵ Disenchantment: the process of the disappearance of the enchanted world, with the substitution of what we live today, the locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual *élan* is the mind. (Taylor 2007:29)

to evil influences and fears and so achieved what Taylor calls ‘the buffered self’⁶, where human identity is separated and protected from a world of spirits and forces. This helped develop a religious ‘interiority’ where religious reflection and growth was a personal endeavour and combined with the sense that, properly disciplined, people could reform themselves as well as society. The buffered self became the buffered world where the natural order created by God was for human benefit and flourishing.

However this development did not stop here and according to Taylor (2007:594), we live in a world of ‘cross pressures’ where the old beliefs and views are destabilised and new ones have formed, leading to a post-Durkheimian dispensation . In Western societies you find a generalised culture of ‘authenticity’ or expressive individualism in which people are encouraged to find their own way. Although the ethic of authenticity originated in the Romantic period, it has taken over popular culture in recent decades, in the time since the Second World War, if not even closer to the present (2007:299). Taylor says: “ ...my hypothesis is that the post-war slide in our social imaginary more and more into a post-Durkheimian age has destabilised and undermined the various Durkheimian dispensations. This has had the effect of either gradually releasing people to be recruited into the fractured culture, or in the case where the new consumer culture has quite dislocated the earlier outlook, of explosively expelling people into this fractured world” (2007:491).

Along with other authors Taylor concludes that in some ways the post-1960s generations are deeply alienated from traditional forms of Christian faith in the West. Einstein (2008:21), for example, describes the change that took place after the 1960s as the ‘religious switch’ where the ‘baby boomers’ dropped away from faith when they were young and never reconnected with a religious institution. She describes religion for this questing generation as “something they select through purchase and

⁴The buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement (Taylor 2007:41).

creation” (2008:22) and confirms that this was only possible through the elimination of the negative connotations attached to not attending church, or to the acceptance of renunciation of one’s parents’ faith, and through the influx of other faiths. The idea that religious meaning is created not by the producers of messages but through an interaction of text, context and user represents a significant shift of power that challenges previous understandings and power structures of Christianity. The individualistic belief systems of today are partly due to the impact of globalisation being felt during the 1960s and 1970s: people had higher levels of education, enjoyed more mobility and travel, were exposed to the pluralist images of television, and had the increased incomes and leisure to explore other lifestyles.

When one considers the student unrest of the 60s and 70s then a general rebellion against the ‘system’ can be seen. In the aftermath of the turmoil of those years where it was attempted to break down barriers between spheres of life, a synthesis occurred between capitalism, productivity and a desire for personal development and self-expression. For such a synthesis to succeed certain things such as social equality had to be discarded. To do this meant that a certain unease was felt amongst those that had grown into adulthood during the 60s and 70s. This unease has lead many of those to start on a quest to find those values they had embraced earlier on, but in a way that would not upset the status quo. This is where the New Age movement comes in.

In a post-Durkheimian age the idea of doing anything that does not move or inspire you, especially when it comes to religion, seems absurd. Taylor (2007:489) quotes a New Age speaker as saying: “Only accept what rings true to your own inner Self”. This understanding embraces an unlimited pluralism. In the 60s more people also started opposing much of the prevailing religious ethic, seeing a connection between Christian faith and an ethic of discipline and self-control and therefore having to repudiate both in the search for self-fulfilment. Unfortunately such repudiation in both

working and private life is a recipe for a dissolute and irresponsible society (Martin as quoted by Taylor 2007:493). In the North Atlantic societies a certain schizophrenia is present, with people adhering to discipline and self-control in the workplace, but often breaking all the rules in their private lives.

Many people are following their spiritual instincts, looking for a more direct experience and depth to their beliefs. Such a movement seems to come from dissatisfaction with a “life encased entirely in the immanent order” (Taylor 2007:506). There has to be more to life than suburbia, two children and a car. These are the ‘seekers’, the heirs of the expressive revolution. They seek not only spiritual wholeness but also physical and mental health. The basic mode of spiritual life is thus the quest (Roof 2001: 92, 106). Taylor states that this kind of search is often called by its practitioners ‘spirituality’ and is opposed to ‘religion’. He sees the trivialisation of such spirituality by society and orthodox faith traditions as a serious error, reflecting a tendency to offer a simplified and distorted view of what is happening in civilisation.

This tendency to simplify and distort prefers to place the new kinds of spiritual quest under the term “New Age” but this broad category erases the validity and authenticity of many New and Alternative Spiritualities. Many of these are simply self-absorbed trivialities, but many reflect a sincere spiritual reality. Taylor describes it as a kind of autonomous exploration by people who cannot subscribe to the moralism and code-fetishism which they find in churches. He refers to Heelas, Woodhead *et al.* (2004) where the authors identify the spirituality called “New Age” as “being informed by a humanism which is inspired by the Romantic critique of the modern disciplined, instrumental agent, which was central ... to the 60s; the stress is on unity, integrity, holism, individuality” (Taylor 2007:510). The authors also stress that this spirituality is not the same as the ‘wellbeing’ culture, as it goes much deeper than this.

2.1.4 The Ecological Crisis

As I have mentioned previously, this study has as point of departure the premise that there is an ecological crisis and that urgent action needs to be taken. The reality is that the actions of humankind have so disturbed natural ecological processes that the Earth's ecosystems will fail⁷. The ecological crisis is the result of the activities of humankind on the ecological systems of the Earth. The activities include almost every aspect of modern industrial society: mining, processing, factories, mechanised farming, urbanisation, and consumerism. These activities were initiated in the drive to gain personal wealth and well-being. This drive is not necessarily evil in itself, but has been subverted into greed and selfishness, resulting in the terrible injustices of modern society. It is unacceptable to live in a world where these injustices are being perpetrated every second of every day; it is unacceptable to pretend that one person's well-being and prosperity can be had at the expense of another's. Therefore it is clear that the ecological crisis needs to be addressed from the deepest part of one's being, one's spiritual beliefs. Conradie and Martin (2006:439) report that the lack of overtly religious language to motivate environmental concerns seems to indicate a Western-style privatised form of religion which disregards the significance of religious beliefs for the political and economical spheres, as well as for the environment.

Many theologians agree that the ecological crisis is a spiritual and cultural crisis.⁸

For example Conradie (2005a:285), a Reformed Protestant theologian, sees the role of theological reflection in the exposure of the fundamental flaw in modern thinking: the lack of recognition of the devastating impact of human action on society and the

⁷ To substantiate this claim would involve a lengthy discussion and I would rather refer the reader to the extensive literature already available (Conradie 2006). Unfortunately the requirement to have to substantiate this claim is a reflection of a lack of awareness by the sceptic.

⁸ John of Pergamon, a Greek Orthodox theologian, supports this concept in *Ecological Ascetism: A Cultural Revolution*. www.unep.org/ourplanet/imgversn/76/pergamon.html [accessed 19/09/2008]

environment. This is why the identification of green spirituality is important in theological reflection and praxis. It is a sad truth, however, that not all theologians consider addressing the ecological crisis a religious and spiritual priority; in fact conservative and evangelical theologians such as Whelan *et al* (1996), decry the fact that many Christians are beginning to see their mission as ‘to save the Earth’, believing such views hostile to Judeo-Christian values. Recently the Pope criticised the trend to promote the ‘worship of nature’⁹ following the success of the film *Avatar*. In spite of this, there has been great progress in theological thought regarding the environment, to be discussed in Chapter IV.

2.1.5 An Ecological Ethic

Aldo Leopold is widely recognised as formulating the concept of an ethic in nature. His book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) joins the ranks of works by Thoreau and Muir as environmental classics. He first proposed a “land ethic” which he describes as “a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual” (1949:203). A land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include all the components sustaining life.

An ecological ethic refers to the norms and beliefs that inform a person’s or a community’s behaviour with regards to nature, that is the nonhuman component. To support an ecological ethic means that support is given to policies and activities that will not harm the Earth’s natural systems. In fact, deliberate choices are made in favour of Earth. Ultimately as human beings are part of the Earth’s systems, these decisions will be to their own advantage, or least to future generations. Every person

⁹ Pope Criticizes Avatar For Its "Worship Of Nature" by Jessica Glasser, Vatican City (WUSA/AP) <http://www.wusa9.com/news/local/story.aspx?storyid=95854&catid=175> [accessed 12-01-2010]

can make these decisions on an individual basis, but most importantly these decisions must be made in the world's arenas of power where extremely powerful entities such as the world's corporations operate.

De Gruchy and Field (in Villa-Vicencio and De Gruchy (1994:20)) propose that an ecological ethic is an ecological perspective on reality which views all of God's creation as an interconnected and interdependent system. Therefore can there be a unique ecological ethic? Van De Veer and Pierce (2003:xviii) conclude that the most acceptable moral outlook is the one that is clear, compatible with the best scientific theories and results and also compatible with our deepest, most prejudice-free, specific moral convictions about particular cases. Whatever is decided, most ethical theories include traditional views and therefore theological reflection is extremely important. The human world is living according to a specific ethos regarding nature. This has to be expressed in the values and norms of a community to account for moral choices. If a society today reflects an ethos of lack of care, love and knowledge then ethical reflection will expose these flaws.

Ethical resources can, for example, be found in the Old Testament wisdom literature, predominantly the book of Proverbs. Ethos is the practical side of moral behaviour, and Baumann (2009:17) defines ethics as a reflection on this practical ethos. To accept most ethical propositions one does not have to believe in the faith tradition that produced the wisdom literature and therefore it can be adapted to fit different perspectives. This makes these ethics accessible, and the right solutions for basic problems can be found easily. Similar examples can be found in other faith traditions. The choice to follow the advice or ignore it is up to the each human being, encouraging ethical capability, a significant point in this study. Kretzschmar (in Villa-Vicencio and De Gruchy (1994:2)) states that there are a number of factors that influence ethical judgement: personal experience and family background; social

context and the convictions of social groups; texts such as the Bible; faith traditions; theological discourse; and in the Christian context, the Holy Spirit.

The Catholic theologian, Hans Kueng (1996:2), stresses that a global ethic does not mean a global religion or even global consensus on what ideology should be followed. He suggests that there is enough consensus on fundamental issues to construct guidelines acceptable to all. He names these the ‘four irrevocable directives’:

- a commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life;
- a commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order;
- a commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness;
- a commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership.

These directives were formulated in the “Declaration toward a Global Ethic” by the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993 and signed by nearly two hundred representatives of religious traditions.

2.1.6 Ecofeminism and feminist theologies

I want to include ecofeminism in the discussion of key theoretical concepts as it informs my point of departure in this study. It also offers a link to feminist theologies and offers many alternatives to “male-stream” thinking. Feminism is the transformation of women’s consciousness and the changing of societal values as a direct challenge to patriarchalism, the practice or defence of the concept that society is constructed of family units where the male plays the primary role in terms of authority¹⁰. However, the feminist movement is also “fragmented into a multiplicity of feminist identities” (Castells 2004:258), and therefore transcends this definition.

¹⁰ See Warren, 1994:16, for an explanation of this claim.

Ecofeminism is one of these feminist identities. Ecofeminism in itself has divergent discourses, with Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), being one of the earliest and best known voices. Another well-known ecofeminist from the South, Ivone Gebara, points out that ecofeminism is more than an 'echo' of feminism (2003:94), apart from being a feminist discourse, it wants to go beyond the discourse into praxis, searching for solutions to daily-life problems. I concur when she says that "ecofeminism is born of daily life ..., of the lack of municipal garbage collection, ... the sores on children's skin. This is true because it is usually women who have to deal with daily survival issues..." (1999:2). She believes that theologies could be a source of dialogue trying to bridge the gap created by patriarchal religious systems.

Ecofeminism as a movement gained impetus when the meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power station in Pennsylvania, USA, in 1979, prompted diverse groups to oppose the use of nuclear power. Women's groups found that the nuclear threat gave them a common ground to oppose the status quo. A true grassroots movement, it arose from study groups and direct action campaigns. As a social and political movement, ecofeminism unites environmentalism with feminism. There is wide consensus amongst ecofeminists that economic and social systems built on patriarchal images and according to patriarchal strictures are leading to the Earth's destruction. Not only women have been oppressed by patriarchal society but also other races, classes and nature.

The essentialist roots of ecofeminism sometimes tend to mystify women's experiences in order to locate women closer to nature than men, and so perpetuate an oppositional, dualistic way of thinking. In order to answer the question whether women are closer to nature than men, one has to locate women on one side or the other of the nature-culture dualism (Ruether 1996:3). Since we are all part of nature,

and our culture is also part of us, the question ultimately makes no sense. Although women are deeply covenanted with life, I see both men and women having a commitment to all the vital elements that compose life.

Another face of feminism is expressed in Christian feminist theologies. These unite feminism with theology within a framework of environmental precepts and in so doing identify the greatest problem in the world today not as secularisation but as the fact that life on Earth is jeopardised by the practices of dehumanisation, violence, exploitation, and extinction (Fiorenza 1995:27). Christian feminist theologians offer an interpretation of the times through their analyses of current challenges facing Christians and communities. This is theology as an activity, an ongoing process rooted in praxis. One of the most consistent and coherent Christian ecofeminist theologians today is Rosemary Radford Ruether. Her significant book *Gaia and God* (1992) is recognised as an ecofeminist classic, and she refers to the Earth as Gaia, a living system¹¹. Following this recognition of the Earth as a living system, she proposes a vibrant symbiosis of all religions which must go through a process of converging dialogues, and therefore ecofeminists (and by inference, theologians) of many regions can make their own cultural syntheses. Ruether believes that “the God in whom we live and move and have our being is not some detached spiritual being in heaven, but the one who is in and through and under the whole life process. The whole cosmos is God’s body. For Christians it is the Body of Christ as the over-coming of our alienation and separation from God’s sacramental presence in creation.”¹²

Hall (2005:801) disagrees that the doctrine of creation and the biblical narrative which it develops are narratives about the origins and processes of the natural world. He

¹¹ This was first proposed by James Lovelock in 1979. (*Gaia, a new look at life on Earth*. 2000. Oxford University Press).

¹² Ruether made this statement at a lecture “Ecofeminism and Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth.” in the series “Keeping the Spirit Alive” presented by St. Stephen’s College and given in Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta on June 2 and 3, 1998. www.ualberta.ca/ST.STEPHENS/ksa-97-8.htm [accessed 15/09/2004]

proposes adhering to the concept of a theology of creation. He considers the discourse of creation as configuring the world as a realm of irreducible value. The goodness of creation is experienced as an encounter with beauty and he believes that humans can see the world as nature, to be studied through science, and the world as creation, as object of value.

The transcendence in ecofeminist theology is not a concept of a God as a male disembodied entity outside the universe, but as a renewing reality radically free from systems of domination and distortion. Rosemary Radford Ruether states that: “God in patriarchal thought has been modelled after alienated male-identified mind or soul that has been thought of as prior to body, existing in an unoriginated, unembodied mental realm outside of and ruling over the physical cosmos. By contrast, ecofeminist theology embodies God in and through and under the whole cosmic process” (Ruether in Ahearn and Gatje, 2005:237). As an example of the tension between transcendence and immanence, Suchocki in Chopp (1994:41), discusses Mary Daly’s work and concludes that “for Daly and all feminists, immanence is no lesser category than transcendence; the two are inseparably linked, with immanence usually being predominant”. The significance of positioning God in the world is that the suffering and oppression is also inflicted on the immanent God with us. In full cognisance of the immanence/transcendence discourse, another well-known theologian, Sally McFague (1993), seeks to restore the sense of the sacred through the metaphor of the universe as the body of God. By considering the magnificent and incomprehensible universe, and all its parts, living or non-living, as God, McFague attempts to reconceive Christian faith in a way that an agenda can be drawn up that calls for all religions, nations, professions and people to reconstruct their lives and their work to help the Earth survive and prosper. She suggests this ‘panentheistic’ worldview (1993:22) to meditate on the body as a model for doing theology in an ecological

context; and states that in doing so does not reduce God to things, but rather attempts to provide a metaphor for God having “an empathetic, intimate and sympathetic knowledge of the world”. By using McFague’s model a revision to the sacramental approach can be attempted; enabling a holistic approach using non-hierarchical and non-aggressive God-images.

The value of feminism, ecofeminism and feminist theologies in this study is that the green spirituality intrinsic in their ethos enables the development of an ecological ethic for theological reflection and praxis, with the Earth as its point of departure. This is the Earth of the every-day lived experience of the marginalised and oppressed, who are so often the women and the children, as well as suffering nature.

2.1.7 Deep Ecology

This branch of philosophical thinking, closely associated with the philosopher Arne Naess, who first used the term ‘deep ecology’ in 1973, finds resonance in theology, as well as ecofeminism, and as such needs to be included in this discourse. In the deep spiritual awakening that deep ecologists experience through contact with wild nature I recognise green spirituality. Deep ecology also shares with ecofeminism “the principle of absolute respect for nature as the foundation of liberation from patriarchalism and industrialism” (Castells 2004:175).

The deep ecology approach, as developed by well-known thinkers such as Arne Naess and Bill Devall, sees environmental degradation, overpopulation, genetic engineering and other modern practices as the result of anthropocentrism (human-centeredness), grounded in Western religion and philosophy. They distinguish between ‘shallow’ and ‘deep’ ecology, in which the first sees humankind separate from nature and values

nature not for its own sake but for human ends and purposes. Deep ecologists maintain that humankind has only a self-proclaimed right to being the evolutionary managers of Earth. They say that self-realisation must include the non-human world and that all organisms and entities are equal in intrinsic worth (Benton and Short 2000:195). This way of thinking counters Western philosophy's separation of human beings from other species.

Despite their good intentions deep ecologists still exhibit a pervasive masculinist bias that works against their aims (Zimmerman in MacKinnon and McIntyre 1995:125). Deep ecologists are also rooted in their own personal experiences of connection and wholeness in wild nature. Such individualism goes counter the fundamental interconnectedness of the universe and has a taint of elitism. However, according to Hinsdale (MacKinnon and McIntyre 1995:203), deep ecology and ecofeminism can suggest several themes to Christian theology which could change the stance on creation and salvation. For example, identifying humankind as a species amongst many is a theological concept of power as it transcends race, religion and gender. It is a “global identity put forward on behalf of all human beings” (Castells 2004:185).

The deep ecology movement joins the rights-based movements in speaking of intrinsic rights being allocated to all living things. The problem with rights-based ethics is that these rights need to be allocated, immediately setting up a hierarchy. The debate is also open as to whom or what deserves rights. I can point out that in the past children and women had no rights. What about animals, plants and natural features? The success of legal procedures to preserve wilderness areas points to such a development of rights. However, when rights conflict it is very difficult to apply justice. A failure in normative guidance necessary for the application of such rights seems to be lacking as individual practitioners of either deep ecology or rights-based philosophy exhibit ethical behaviour more in a way of being than a way of doing.

2.1.8 Eco-theology

Literature in the relative new field of eco-theology is extensive and growing and the topic deserves a deeper analysis than I can give here. The term eco-theology is a contraction of the two words ecology and theology. It implies that one cannot do without the other. Deane-Drummond in her excellent work, *Eco-theology* (2008), summarises and evaluates contemporary eco-theologies, noting that ecological concern is connecting disparate groups, even from different religious traditions.

Eco-theology cannot be taken as an equivalent to green spirituality, in spite of considerable overlap. In this study I wanted to keep the discussion as open as possible, including the most superficial themes of green spirituality found in modern media. The very nature of the mass media, its inherent superficiality, does not lend itself to the sacred nature of eco-theology's point of departure. The green spirituality found in films may lead the viewer to explore deeper theological themes and rightly so, but in itself remains part of mass entertainment with all its attending baggage.

Eco-theology, as approached from a liberation perspective, "links the ruination of ecosystems with oligarchic, demagogic oppression" (Smith 1997:57) and therefore has much in common with ecofeminism and liberation theology. In fact, an eco-ethical perspective is implicit in liberation theology. The dispossession of the poor from land, politics and wealth is also the denial of the right to live in "right relations with the land itself" (Gutierrez 1984:10). Liberation eco-theology proposes a right way of living which will allow the poor to have meaningful and adequate livelihoods. It is helpful to understand that the poor now includes the 'new poor', namely nature, as described by McFague (1993:200). Leonardo Boff (1997:104) asserts that liberation theology must join with ecology to address the ecological crisis and the needs of the poor; in his words: "they start from two bleeding wounds". This insight

is clear when one considers that the poor and marginalised are the first to suffer from pollution, the loss of land and the “combined forces of economies designed for ‘unlimited growth’”(Smith 1997:58). Eco-theological discourse serves as a foundation for the motivation of this study and therefore informs the theological premises that value the Earth and the natural systems that sustain life.

2.2 Summary

Religious and secular environmentalists over a wide spectrum have expressed concern for nature. This concern resonates with what I identify as green spirituality. The green spirituality expressed in the work of ecofeminists, deep ecologists, eco-theologians and environmentalists the world over can be used to counter the misguided ideas and values that destroy nature and oppress human beings. Green spirituality present in the work of eco-theologians such as Ruether and McFague validates the prophetic voices of faith traditions that join with the secular environmentalist and political movements to call for reform and action. Religious environmentalism does not call for moral vision where none exists; it offers alternatives to ones that exist at present.

In concluding I want to point out that the green spirituality offered in the films (to be discussed in the next chapter) are perhaps pale versions of the realities that each of the faith traditions and other movements can offer, yet often these are the only encounters the person on the street will ever have. In Western societies and especially in Europe, people are reaching adulthood without having ever set foot in a church and discussions with explicit religious content are met with incomprehension (Graeb 2006:289). However, the film industry will continue to flourish, and the experience of receiving major portions of information from two-dimensional sources will most likely influence how we experience meaning-making.

CHAPTER III

In the third chapter I present the data, namely the identification and analysis of green spirituality found in mass media such as the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki. The data is collected through critical evaluation and comparative analysis of these films, referring to the situational and empirical analysis of the present situation through published works.

The purpose of this evaluation and analysis is to be able to describe the green spirituality present in the films and perform a hermeneutical analysis. The hypothesis of the study will be considered in this context: that green spirituality can be used for developing an ecological ethic in reflection and praxis in practical theology to serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis.

3.1 AVATAR

3.1.1 Introduction

A huge tree, spirits floating as seeds, a deity that communicates through everything and yet is mute, human-like beings who communicate with all that is living through biological systems. Splendid images seen by many thousands across the globe; the recent success of the blockbuster film, *Avatar* (2009), raises the question whether there is a spirituality to be found there. I would suggest that *Avatar*'s unparalleled success resides in religious spectacle, the positive side of being bowled over by a beatific vision. *Avatar* insists that worship can and should be transformative. As an audience wowed by the spectacular effects, we are carried away, transported to Pandora. Amongst the dazzling graphics and fast-paced action, writer and producer

James Cameron introduced the “Soul Tree” as the spiritual centre of the alien planet, Pandora. This is the centre of worship and spirituality of the Na’vi people of Pandora, being the place where they communicate with their deity Eywa.

The Na’vi are rather large, blue-skinned beings who have tails and use hairbraids as biological interfaces to communicate with other animals and plants on the planet. Some have accused the film of promoting nature worship, while fans have found on Pandora a world they can believe in. Make no mistake, *Avatar* is a Hollywood film subscribing to the typical plotlines and characters. However, by virtue of the sheer inventiveness of its producers a new dimension in virtual reality has been opened.

3.1.2 The film¹³

Jake Sully, the main protagonist, is a marine who has lost the function of his legs in a military encounter. He is to replace his twin who has been killed and who had been a participant in a scientific programme on the planet Pandora. The programme involved combining human genetic material with alien material thereby creating a living organism resembling the native humanoid species but being controlled by the human component. The avatars have to make contact with the Na’vi living on Pandora and to

¹³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_\(2009_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film))

DIRECTOR: James Cameron	COMPOSER: James Horner
WRITER: James Cameron	CAST: Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Stephen Lang, Sigourney Weaver, Michelle Rodriguez, Joel David Moore, Giovanni Ribisi
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Mauro Fiore	DATE OF RELEASE: December 10, 2009; December 18, 2009 (US)
EDITOR: James Cameron, John Refoua, Stephen E. Rivkin	COUNTRY: United States
PRODUCER: James Cameron, Jon Landau	LANGUAGE: English
PRODUCTION COMPANY: Lightstorm Entertainment, Dune Entertainment, Ingenious Film Partners	RUNTIME: 162 minutes
DISTRIBUTOR : 20 th Century Fox	COLOR: Colour
	CERTIFICATION: 13 PG LV (SA)

convince them to allow human exploitation of minerals (Unobtainium) found on the planet, a large deposit being under the 'Home Tree'.

The shuttle from Earth flies over the fantastic forests of Pandora, then reaches the human area of activity: an opencast mine, huge trucks and digging machines, smokestacks of the industrial plants and triple barbed wire fences surrounding the human village, all serving to establish the image of 'ugly' industrialisation in contrast with the beautiful trees of the rainforest.

On his first sortie into Pandora's world as avatar, Jake loses all his gear (the 'baggage' of his human life), and falls down a cliff into a deep pool. He goes through a physical (and symbolic) immersion in water and is reborn into the wilderness. The other main character and future love interest, the Na'vi woman Nyteri, wants to shoot him but a seed of the Soul Tree (a tree imbued with deep spiritual meaning) lands on her arrow tip and she sees this as a sign. Jake is covered by a layer of Soul Tree seeds, establishing him as the 'chosen one'. Through Jake's narrated video logs (a film in a film) the beliefs of the Na'vi are explained: "A network of energy that flows through all living things,... all energy is borrowed and one day you will have to give it all back." The full initiation in the Na'vi tribe is very important to Jake, "the Na'vi say everyone is born twice, the second time when you win your place among the people forever", reflecting his need to belong and even a desire for eternal life.

In an attempt to stop the proposed destruction of the Home Tree, scientist Grace Augustine tries to explain the value of the trees: "I'm not talking about some pagan voodoo here, I'm talking about something real, measurable in the biology of the forest ... there is some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees – like the synapses between neurons and each tree has 10^4 connections and there are 10^{12} trees on Pandora – more connections than the human brain. It's a global network

and the Na'vi can access it. They can upload and download data, memories at sites.” A thoroughly ‘scientific’ explanation. Ironically she later realises that the value is far more than something scientifically measurable when she dies and is shown to be joined with Eywa, the deity of the Na'vi.

The Home Tree is destroyed in a scene reminiscent of the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York. Jake is cast out of the tribe and is imprisoned, but escapes and manages to set up the avatar control units and returns to his avatar body. Augustine is injured and the only way to heal her is with Na'vi help. To regain their trust Jake tames a ferocious flying beast and an attempt is made to transfer Augustine to her avatar body through a ceremony at the Soul Tree where all the Na'vi are connected to the earth and each other forming a network. Grace dies, but she is with Eywa: “I am with her, she is real” making the transition from scientific positivism to spiritual belief, therefore showing the viewer that such a transition is possible.

Jake organises a counterattack on the human invaders and prays to Eywa at the Soul Tree to help: “I’m probably just talking to a tree right now but if you’re there I need to give you a heads up [an advance warning]. If Grace is with you, look into her memories, look into the world we come from, there’s no green there. They killed their mother and they are going to do the same here... look you chose me for something. I will stand and fight, you know I will but I need a little help here.” Interestingly, Grace Augustine also played the role of a mother to Jake, so her death at the hands of the humans and Earth’s death are closely linked. At the last moment all the animals on the planet join the Na'vi and the humans start losing. Just the Colonel, the leader of the soldiers on Pandora, refuses to give up and chases Nyteri and then Jake, in order to kill them. The Colonel is operating a mechanical avatar, a machine which is as big and as strong as the Na'vi, technology against nature. He attacks the pod where the human Jake is lying and rips it open. As humans cannot breathe the air of Pandora,

Jake is going to die and his avatar collapses but Nyteri saves human Jake, cradling him in her arms reminiscent of a *Pieta* statue, and the battle is won. All the humans have to leave Pandora and the film ends with Jake in his human form being melded to the avatar form and the final scene is of Jake's avatar's eyes opening.

3.1.3 Discussion

James Cameron took the title of the film *Avatar* from the Hindu term describing an incarnation of a god in a fleshly form, but the film rather tends to animist and Native American Indian beliefs embedded in the Hollywood Christian framework. The film is a stunning visual experience and completely believable in spite of the 'alien' theme. The viewer believes in the goodness of Pandora and its beings and is totally unsympathetic to the Colonel and the soldiers. The sensitivity with which the Na'vi interact with the planet's organisms is convincing and recognisable as it draws a lot of material from Native American lore. The Na'vi are in all aspects larger than life and the empathy one feels for seven foot blue cat-eyed beings with tails is amazing.

The destruction of the massive Home Tree is wrenching and the sorrow one feels is deep. One responds to the sheer wanton waste and destruction of something beautiful and unique, just as most people respond to images of the rainforest on Earth being destroyed. Another tree, the Tree of Souls, is the most sacred place for the Na'vi, echoing Jewish mythology. Schwartz (2004:164) describes a Cabbalistic Tree of Life where God has a tree of flowering souls in paradise. Here all souls are stored before they are born and here they attach themselves after death. The Soul Tree in *Avatar* is probably derived from this myth.

Those who have died are still present and, in addition, most beings on the planet have sensory connective organs which can be used for inter- and intra-species

communication, forming a complex network. The deity Eywa never speaks or is seen, yet she is omnipresent – the perfect immanent god. Her interference by motivating the other beings on the planet to fight back can be interpreted as an attempt to restore balance and not just a good/evil dualism. In fact this kind of dualism is really not present. The bad things done are due to ignorance, blindness and greed – very human qualities – and the good things are intrinsically good as a part of the balance and harmony of a natural system. This same ambiguity is present in the work of Hayao Miyazaki, to be discussed later.

As the above synopsis shows, *Avatar* as a film falls perfectly into the successful Hollywood mould. Detweiler (2010a:22) mentions that successful Hollywood films usually have six common themes:

1. An interesting, high-stakes conflict that rises as the stakes get higher.
2. A novel twist such as the virtual world of Pandora.
3. Visual interest as the characters interact with other characters and with the environment.
4. The main character is interesting but still accessible.
5. They follow clear rules of cause and effect.
6. They use a linear progression of events to tell a story.

He says that films are about individuals learning to situate themselves within the context of a larger world, and the visual style echoes this by placing the characters in active situations. Successful films encourage the audience to support the main character, and these usually represent audience members in key ways. They share demographics and typical life choices or otherwise serve as fantasy figures, presenting idealised versions of what the audience want or already imagine themselves to be.

The main protagonist in *Avatar*, Jake Sully, displays the typical characteristics of the hero of a 'coming-of-age' narrative, as he goes through the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation (Aichele and Walsh 2002:79) and as described by Waaijman (Chapter II) as liminal spirituality. Dettweiler (2010a:26) quotes Bordwell (1985) as saying: "Causality is the prime unifying principle in classical Hollywood cinema...", all the elements of storytelling are there but are subordinate to the flow of cause and effect. Films such as *Avatar* are built around this concept, every action by the protagonist has consequences and the accumulation of effects leads him or her to the resolution of the plot through action. Coincidence is not used because it cannot be used to close a narrative. Human action is needed to avoid the sense of a machinistic world which goes against the human desire to determine destinies through their actions.

The film is very clear on the destruction wrought on a pristine environment by mining and other industrial activities. The destruction of the Home Tree and the intricate web of life on Pandora is an environmental disaster. The destructive presence of the military is a theme that recurs in almost all the films reviewed and the invasion of another people's life-world is abhorrent. Significantly the main 'bad' character, Colonel Quaritch, has a battleship bearing a dragon symbol. This is perhaps an allusion to the Biblical story of Revelation 12 where the dragon chases the woman clothed with the sun: she is with child, crying out in the pain of her delivery. The Earth comes to her rescue, swallowing the river pouring from the dragon's mouth. Ruether (1996:93) says the dragon represents the destructive power which inspires the tyrannical empires. It is the Earth that rescues the woman (the people of God) from the destructive power of chaos.

Mass media play an important role in the legitimisation of social symbols, which in turn have the ability to create worldviews and make these visible in the public sphere.

Popular films are not simply a portrayal of society's dreams but also mirror and reproduce the beliefs such a society may have. Through films such as *Avatar*, people can be entertained yet also be able to make sense of the world and attempt at meaning-making. Any theology that wants to remain relevant in today's world needs acknowledge the role the media play in modern society's process of meaning-making.

3.2 EMERALD FOREST

3.2.1 Introduction

The Englishman, John Boorman, based his 1985 film on a true story – the kidnapping of a seven year old boy by Indians in the Amazon rainforest. Through the genre of a nature adventure story, he manages to show the Amazon jungle in an unsentimental and authentic way. Up till then the jungle had been portrayed as menacing, unfriendly and an enemy. Boorman turned that perception around and by the end of the film, one is immersed in the story of a unique life and culture, that of the South American rainforest Indians, a culture under severe threat along with the plants and animals of the Amazon rainforest.

The significance of the Amazon rainforest was not as well-known then as it is now, where few people can say that the presence of large areas of inaccessible forest is of no value to humanity. However, it seems as if knowledge in this case has not enabled significant change, with large areas of rainforest being destroyed on a daily basis, for such trivial use as paper and garden furniture, or to enable the planting of monoculture plantations of oil-palms and gum trees.

3.2.2 The film¹⁴

Bill Markham is moving to the city (Manaus) as he has been assigned as engineer on a dam-building project. The destructive nature of this project is shown by the bulldozers pushing over trees and thick chains ripping through the undergrowth. During a picnic on the building site of the dam, at the edge of the rainforest, little Tommy is taken by Indians. An arrow is shot at the father and is identified as belonging to the Invisible People. Ten years later the boy still has not been found but the parents are still looking for him, the mother in the orphanages of the city and the father in the rainforest.

Markham and a journalist, Uwe Werner, travel by boat downriver and here the audience is informed about the importance of the rainforest through their conversation. Markham spots a snake in the water, anticipating the later explanation of the role of the spirit snake. Meanwhile Tommy (now called Tommee by his new family) and his Indian father are hunting in the forest. The toucan calls and they are alerted to the presence of the Fierce People (the ‘bad’ Indians in the film), luckily they are not seen. The film uses a simplistic dichotomy of light and good versus dark and bad as a device to tell the story. By means of detailed and authentic shots of the ‘good’ Indians Indian life and social interaction are shown and they are introduced as

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Emerald_Forest

DIRECTOR: John Boorman	COMPOSER: Brian Gascoigne, Junior Homrich
WRITER: Rospo Pallenberg	CAST: Charley Boorman, Powers Boothe, Dira Paes, Meg Foster
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Philippe Rousselot	DATE OF RELEASE: 1985
EDITOR: William Reynolds (II)	COUNTRY: United Kingdom
PRODUCER: John Boorman, Michael Dryhurst, Edgar Gross	LANGUAGE: English, Portuguese
PRODUCTION COMPANY: Embassy Films Associates	RUNTIME: 110 minutes
DISTRIBUTOR : Embassy Films	COLOR: Colour
	CERTIFICATION: 12

a warm, caring society. Soon Tommee has to undergo a coming of age ceremony where he has to 'die'. He has to bear the excruciating bites of ants and is then submerged in the river, emerging a man: "The boy is dead, the man is born". He is painted with a special paint to make him 'invisible' and he is also given drugs to discover his spirit animal, which is a hawk. Meanwhile Markham and his companion have attracted the attention of the Fierce People and the chief wants Markham's automatic weapon after one of his warriors is shot and killed. His almost ecstatic shudder after licking the blood of the warrior on the bullet that he digs from the chest of the dead man is quite disturbing. Poor Uwe Werner becomes their dinner but Markham can run for his life as he has "the heart of a hungry jaguar". Markham is wounded, runs blindly and a snake lunges at him, making him change direction. He stumbles down a steep hillside, close to where Tommee is collecting stones in the waterfall. Tommee recognises him as "Daddee, the one who lives in my head when I dream"; they are both fall into the river and this time Markham is being cleansed and reborn into the jungle.

In spite of being healed by Indian care, Markham is angry with the Indian father for having taken Tommee but he replies that he felt sorry for the 'termite child' and did not have the heart to send him back to the 'Dead World'. Meanwhile Tommee has fetched Kachiri, an Indian girl, as his wife and refuses to go back to the city. Markham is drugged to discover his spirit animal, a jaguar, and is transported back to the building site. While the group is away the Fierce People attack the village and abduct some young women to be used as exchange for weapons and other goods. The dead are burned on a funeral pyre, (setting their souls free with fire) and their ashes mixed with those of the ancestors. The warriors drink a mixture containing some of the ash and leave again to find the women. They are unsuccessful and Tommee goes to get help from his other father, Daddee. In the favelas in the city he meets members of a tribe, the Bat People, who have left the rainforest and have only sad artificial

flowers and a gaudy statue of an Indian left as their culture. Tommee goes into a trance to 'see' where Daddee is and during his trance he flies as a hawk again, and remembers where he lived. Using Markham's weapons and the Bat People from the favelas, they raid the brothel where the women from the village have been taken. The customers of the brothel are killed rather cold-bloodedly and a pitched battle is fought against the now drunken and degenerate Fierce People. Markham tries to convince Tommee that "more white people will come here and enter the world and they will cut down more trees and they will take what is yours", but Tommee is adamant that even the big 'logjam' (the dam) can be broken. "We will ask the frogs to sing very loudly" to bring a flood to break the dam and they do indeed have a ceremony after which the frogs start singing and dark clouds gather. Markham decides to do something himself and puts down explosives, after advising the workers that the dam might break. Before he can press the detonator button, the flood destroys the dam. The film ends with Tommee telling a story about all the water spirit snakes joining together into the Great Anaconda which is very angry and everyone laughs, leaving the audience to decide who is the power, the water spirit snake or the flood water? Before the end credits the audience is informed about the disappearance of the rainforests and the people that live in them, and ends with the phrase "they still know what we have forgotten".

3.2.3 Discussion

In spite of some poor acting and a contrived plot, the film redeems itself by the beautiful on-site scenes of the rainforest and the tribal villages. The interweaving of mostly accurate natural and cultural history with a classic storyline, allows the audience to relate to material that may have been inaccessible or ignored otherwise. As in the film *Avatar*, the story follows the typical coming-of-age scenario (liminal spirituality), and also relies on drug-induced spiritual experiences to enable the

audience to relate to the spiritual beliefs of the Indians (indigenous spirituality). The message the audience will take home from this film is the beauty and harmony of the intact Amazon jungle, the destruction caused by the activities of other humans, and in a voyeuristic fashion, that the beliefs of other people can be just as valid and as important as Western beliefs. In this way the film does convey a positive message. The elements of Amazon Indian beliefs such as the spirit animals, the role of dreams, the role of water to wash away the boy to become a man, the release of the spirit through fire and the subsequent mixing of ashes and then drinking the mixture, are in part alien to Western thought and yet can allow the viewer to relate to a world that has its own logic and harmony.

3.3 DANCES WITH WOLVES

3.3.1 Introduction

Dances with Wolves was Kevin Costner's first attempt at directing a film and proved to be a surprising success. As in the case of *Emerald Forest*, this film took a familiar topic and turned previously held views around. No longer did one see the West as a place to be 'tamed' but rather as a place where the 'civilised' could be taught and changed. A different worldview is presented, going against the prejudices and 'common sense' of before.

The 'taming of the West' is a well-loved theme in American films, usually portraying the rugged taciturn white male hero as bravely conquering the savage Indians and the land they occupy for the benefit of 'civilisation'. Costner challenged this view and cast himself as the sensitive thinker and the Indians as the wise guardians of the open spaces of the West. This theme of flawed hero, who grows by learning wisdom, is also in *Avatar*.

3.3.2 The film¹⁵

The film starts with the main character, Lt. John Dunbar, undergoing medical treatment in a field hospital during the American Civil War. This is where Dunbar, played by Kevin Costner, comes to the turning point in his life. To avoid amputation of his foot he leaves the hospital and returns to the front line. He mounts a horse, a beautiful Palomino called Cisco (an important character in the film), and tries to end his life by riding down the enemy lines. Miraculously he is not shot and his behaviour enables the Union soldiers to advance and beat back the enemy. As a reward Dunbar receives treatment for his foot and is sent to the Western frontier.

The post where Dunbar is supposed to take command is an abandoned set of hovels in a remote area on the Western frontier. The captain who gives him his orders shoots himself shortly after Dunbar leaves and the driver of the mule wagon which transports him to the post also is killed. Dunbar is in fact cut off from the army and ‘civilisation’ and although he believes he will be relieved in the near future, in effect he has ‘died’ to the outside world. He resigns himself to being alone and starts keeping a diary where he makes notes of his surroundings. He notices a wolf watching him and he

¹⁵ http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/CREDITS/Dances_Wolves.htm

DIRECTOR: Kevin Costner	COMPOSER: John Barry, Peter Bufett
WRITER: Michael Blake (I)	CAST: Kevin Costner, Mary McDonnell, Garham Greene (II), Rodney A. Grant, Floyd "Red Crow" Westerman, Tantoo Cardinal
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Dean Semler	DATE OF RELEASE: 1990
EDITOR: William Hoy, Chip Masamitsu, Steve Potter, Neil Travis	COUNTRY: USA
PRODUCER: Bonnie Arnold, Kevin Costner, Jake Eberts, Derek Kavanagh, Jim Wilson (I)	LANGUAGE: English/Sioux
PRODUCTION COMPANY: Majestic Film, Tig Productions	RUNTIME: 183 minutes
DISTRIBUTOR: AMLF (France), Constatin Film (Germany), Orion Pictures Corporation (USA)	COLOR: Color (DeLuxe)
	CERTIFICATION: USA: PG-13

names it Two Socks. This animal eventually becomes a companion, and remains near but is never tamed.

The film distinguishes early on between 'bad' and 'good' Indians, (as is done in *Emerald Forest*) the bad ones being Pawnees, semi-naked, ferociously painted, ruthless killers, and the good being the Lakota Sioux, long-haired and dressed in elaborate beaded leather clothing, a rather simplistic dichotomy which does not do too much harm to the integrity of the story. The Sioux attempt to steal Dunbar's horse but the animal returns home every time. Dunbar, having startled the other main character of the film, Kicking Bird, the Sioux medicine man, during an attempt to steal the horse, decides to visit the Indians himself. He dresses in full dress uniform and with flag and sword rides out by himself, a ridiculous act of bravado. On the way he finds an Indian woman who is bleeding profusely, having attempted to kill herself after the death of her Indian husband. She has blue eyes, alerting the viewer that she is more than 'just an Indian', maintaining convention, as she becomes Dunbar's love interest. He returns her to the Indian camp and shortly thereafter is visited by a group of Indians who have been delegated to ask him when the white men are going to come, a question which is bothering the Indians immensely. Dunbar cannot answer them as he is still an 'outsider'. He realises that the Indians are waiting for the buffalo herds to come and when he hears them (rather implausibly before the Indians do) he goes to alert the tribe. The Indians are dancing and he is almost killed but manages to tell them about the buffalo and joins in the hunt.

The buffalo hunt scenes show dead animals strewn across the plain, killed by white soldiers and hunters (proved by the wagon tracks: technology destroying nature, the bringers of destruction and death). The Indians also kill their share of animals and Dunbar saves a young Indian from being trampled, winning him the friendship of Wind in His Hair, a previously antagonistic young man. Once the Indians see Dunbar

playing with the wild wolf, he is accepted and is named Dances with Wolves. To defend the camp from a raiding Pawnee war party, Dunbar/Dances with Wolves gets guns and ammunition from the post and they repel the attackers. Dunbar/Dances with Wolves and Christine/Stand with a Fist marry and as part of his new role as a full member of the tribe (no longer an 'outsider') he tells Kicking Bird that many white men will come and that they will not share the land with the Indians. The chief, Ten Bears, decides to leave for their winter camp but Dunbar/Dances with Wolves decides to return to the post to fetch his diary.

Unfortunately the post has been re-occupied by troops who shoot the lovely horse, and catch Dunbar, believing he is an Indian. They beat him cruelly and even when they know he is a soldier and white man do not stop mistreating him, as he has 'gone Indian' and is therefore despicable. He decides to reject this 'civilisation' and speaks to the soldiers in Sioux and calls himself Dances with Wolves. Therefore he is shackled and loaded on a wagon to be returned to the fort to be tried as a traitor. Meanwhile the Sioux have realised he is in trouble and a party comes to release him. They wait to attack the wagon as it passes the wolf and a harrowing scene follows where the wolf is shot at by the soldiers, just as Dunbar was at the beginning of the film. The wolf is killed and over his dead body the Indians attack the soldiers (who have to reload after wasting their bullets on the wolf) and successfully release Dances with Wolves. Dances with Wolves wants to leave, believing that the Indians will suffer retaliation because of him and packs up to leave. The diary is produced by a young Indian and is given to them (take the truth and spread the word?).

The couple leave on horseback while Wind in His Hair sits on his horse above them on a cliff and calls out that he is Wind in His Hair and that Dances with Wolves is his friend, over and over. This immensely powerful scene is just before the end of the film, thankfully without showing another massacre (part of the suspense of the film is

the fear of a massacre at the end) and the soldiers find an empty campsite. But the closing frames do tell us that thirteen years later the last remnants of the free Sioux were subjugated.

3.3.3 Discussion

Spectacular vistas of plains and endless horizons bring home the sheer beauty of the landscape, the grassy plains of South Dakota. Dunbar immerses himself in this landscape and gradually loses his Western clothing and demeanour until he is fully Indian, having divested himself of Western dress and thought. Dunbar/Dances with Wolves is not just a resourceful loner, the typical Western icon, but also a dreamer who wants to see the West before it disappears and who writes his thoughts in a book. He is the outcast that will help save the downtrodden and marginalised. This role is ambiguous, as in the end he is the one who is saved and the most poignant deaths are those of the horse and wolf.

The landscape is an important part of the film and a large number of wide angle shots containing small human figures are used, emphasising the puniness of humans. Following Metz (1982:4) I am assuming that all films locate their signifiers on the primary imaginary of visual images. The landscape is in reality far greater than the destructive little human beings, and so also the wolf who gave trust and friendship unconditionally. Therefore the most powerful spiritual messages do not come from the people but from the landscape and the wolf.

Kicking Bird, the Lakota Sioux medicine man, is depicted as the voice of reason and nonviolence. He prevents Dunbar from being killed by the aggressive Wind in His Hair. The Indian spirituality is not so much shown in action but rather as a way of life, in harmony with the landscape and with each other. However this leaning to

nonviolence is absent when the tribe decides to seek revenge against the Pawnees. Costner so effectively demonises those that are killed (the 'bad' Pawnees and soldiers) that their deaths are unremarkable. Even when Stone Calf, an old Sioux Indian is killed by the Pawnees, one remains relatively detached, especially since no mourning or funeral is shown, unlike the funeral scene in *Emerald Forest*.

The so-called Sioux outbreak, with associated U.S. troop manoeuvres and the resultant Wounded Knee massacre, was linked from the beginning with the Ghost Dance. The Lakota Sioux believed that change was not a linear progression through time but rather that the world was a constant. If change happened that was wrong, a simple removal of those elements causing the problem would allow the reversion back to what was before. Therefore if the whites left, the world would be as before. The Lakota Sioux tried to tap into the power of the universe through the ritual of the Ghost Dance which promised to reunite them with their dead relations. In fact the message of the Ghost Dance as described by Short Bull (Hackett 2003: 323) was messianic and strongly Christian. The dance would induce a trance state and the people would see their dead relations. This reunification would restore the time when Indians had control of their land.

The sad history of the Native American Indian is a difficult subject to portray as so much has been distorted through outright falsification and violation of context. Typically practices involving individual spiritual experiences are promoted, while other elements which may be equally important are discarded. The truth about the rituals and their meaning may never be fully known and perhaps should remain so as the use of sacred knowledge can not only be unethical but also offensive. The spirituality depicted in *Dances with Wolves* is therefore effective in the same way as in *Emerald Forest* where it serves to show a people's belief system and way of life that are inseparable from the environment they live in. Alternative ways of relating to

nature are offered, with a better outcome for both humans and nature. The overall feeling though is one of loss and mourning. The environmental destruction of the buffalo and the ecosystem that they were part of, the lack of respect for the land and its people is a historical fact from which modern society should learn.

3.4 THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL

3.4.1 Introduction

The environmental theme is very obvious in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; the Earth is portrayed in much the same condition as it is now, in deep ecological crisis. This remake of Robert Wise's 1951 film of the same name uses more current images to convey the threat of the end of the world. Instead of a giant robot trampling all over the city, gigantic spheres arrive from outer space to collect species from Earth. The original film had a powerful anti-war and anti-nuclear message, saving humans from other humans. I include this film as its message is derived not from a pre-modern society but from a thoroughly post-modern one.

3.4.2 The film¹⁶

¹⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Day_the_Earth_Stood_Still_\(2008_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Day_the_Earth_Stood_Still_(2008_film))

DIRECTOR: Scott Derrickson	COMPOSER: Tyler Bates
WRITER: David Scarpa, Harry Bates, Ryne Douglas Pearson, Stuart Hazeldine	CAST: Keanu Reeves, Jennifer Connelly, Kathy Bates, Jon Hamm, John Cleese, Jaden Smith, Kyle Chandler
CINEMATOGRAPHER: David Tattersall	DATE OF RELEASE: December 12, 2008
EDITOR: Wayne Wahrmann	COUNTRY: USA
PRODUCER: Erwin Stoff, Paul Harris Boardman	LANGUAGE: English
PRODUCTION COMPANY: 20th Century Fox (USA)	RUNTIME: 103 minutes
DISTRIBUTOR: 20th Century Fox Film Corporation (USA), CBS/Fox Video, Fox Video	COLOR: Color
	CERTIFICATION: USA: G

The opening sequences unapologetically showcase the star of the film, Keanu Reeves, but also explain why Klaatu, the alien who arrives on Earth, has a specific human form. He gets a human form from the scientist who discovers a sphere in the remote mountains and reaches out to touch it. The scientist wakes up and his hand is scarred (stigmata?) where a sample has been taken and the sphere is gone. The aliens have developed a technology through which a human can be 'resurrected'.

The film proceeds to the present where the US government is scrambling to assemble a team to deal with an object which is speeding towards Earth. The object however does not crash into Earth but lands gently in a blinding light in Central Park, New York. The main character, Dr. Helen Benson, a space biochemist, is one of the first to approach the sphere. She is portrayed throughout the film as a seeker, a secular humanist who practices science as a form of religion, looking towards the stars, believing something is out there. Now with the arrival of the alien, her belief becomes a reality, and she is ready to help the alien.

A humanoid figure emerges from the sphere and extends its hand but is shot by soldiers. Benson sinks to the ground holding him in a *Pieta*-like posture (as Nyateri does in *Avatar* with human Jake, an interesting reversal) and calls for medical help. A giant humanoid form/robot emerges from the sphere and disables the military weaponry but before it can destroy the humans, the wounded alien stops it. Klaatu says that he has a message that is for all humankind. The US Secretary of State, Regina Jackson, insists that he cannot go to the United Nations but must give her the message. Klaatu is taken for interrogation and as he has the ability to influence electronic equipment he incapacitates the interrogator, dresses in his suit and leaves the underground base. Meanwhile Benson has also left in the confusion and returns home to her stepson, a young boy who is suffering under the premature death of his father (Benson's husband) killed in Iraq. The boy is extremely annoying but has an

important role in Klaatu's transition from unfeeling alien to an understanding being. Benson drives Klaatu out of town and when she asks him what his intentions are, his answer: "I'm a friend to the Earth", is another indication that his priority lies with the Earth and not humanity. They meet up with Mr. Wu, also an alien on Earth for 70 years. Klaatu informs Mr. Wu that the time has come to end humanity's destruction of the Earth but Mr. Wu says that he is staying as he has come to love the humans in spite of their bad traits. Klaatu activates the destruction sequence, the spheres rise and Benson realises that Klaatu is not there to help humanity but is there to destroy it. Her dismay is evident and she is very disappointed in this being that she risked so much to help. Klaatu explains that if the humans die, the Earth will survive. Benson begs him to stop the sequence, saying that humans can change.

A police car arrives and Klaatu first kills and then re-animates the policeman, an illustration of his power and perhaps his disinclination to do harm. Benson sees this as a positive sign and convinces Klaatu to visit an eminent scientist, Professor Barnhardt (a reference to the doctor who transplanted the first human heart, perhaps?) as she wants to convince Klaatu that humans can change. He says to the professor that "You treat the world as you treat each other", but Barnhardt counters with the argument that change only happens when there no longer are any other options: "It is only on the brink that people find the will to change." Benson gets caught by the police but Jacob remains behind with Klaatu. He is scared but when Klaatu saves him from falling off a bridge he starts to trust him, the bridge also representing the point when Klaatu is passing into an attitude of forgiveness. Jacob phones Benson and organises that she meets them and takes Klaatu to a military cemetery where his father is buried, with the intention of getting Klaatu to resurrect his father. Klaatu refuses saying there were some things that can't be undone and tells Jacob that "Nothing ever truly dies". Benson arrives and the emotional reunion between Jacob and Benson convinces Klaatu that human beings can change and he decides to stop the destruction of Earth.

Meanwhile the huge robot that emerged from the sphere with Klaatu, starts to disintegrate into millions of tiny nano-bots which are able to consume anything. The cloud of nano-bots attack Jacob and Benson but Klaatu saves them by holding their hands and taking the nano-bots into his own body. He leaves them under the iconic Central Park Bridge and runs to the sphere, disintegrating as he runs and then melting into the sphere. The nano-bots fall to the ground and disintegrate, the spheres disappear into the sky and the world stands still. Jacob says: “It’s leaving” and Benson responds: “No, he’s leaving” emphasising the transition of alien being to a being with human emotions. Everything human-made stops. The last shot is of the eerily still world, no movement except a flock of birds flying across the sky.

3.4.3 Discussion

The original film was one of the first films to not portray aliens as enemies. As in the original, the alien Klaatu is feared, abused, imprisoned, forced to flee military and political stupidity and subsequently wanders incognito amongst the people, a Christ-like figure. He heals, he resurrects, he comes to save us from ourselves. In the remake however, Klaatu is more concerned about humankind’s devastation of Earth and all its creatures than what is done to humans by other humans. A strong Christological, pre-apocalyptic theme is present throughout, and the main protagonist is a woman (a Mary Magdalene/Mary figure) who goes through the transition to self-understanding. Cowan (2007) describes Klaatu as offering ‘pre-apocalyptic salvation’, and as a possible archetype of the ‘Alien Messiah’. The very clear message of the film is that the only monsters are the humans who want to destroy the messenger who is trying to show them the errors of their ways. The development of Helen Benson’s character is incomplete, in part she is a disciple and in part a mother to Klaatu, and this is perhaps a reflection of her scientific-positivist nature. Yet her faith in the alien from the sky is

quite old-fashioned, indicating that every person has the potential to discover the ‘sacred’ in whatever form they may chose.

The ultimate reality as portrayed in the film is ‘multi-layered’ (Flannery-Dailey 2003) and reflects that this age experiences fears like never before in history. We are threatened by terrorism, nuclear disaster, environmental destruction, technological advancement without ethics, rampant consumerism and globalism without community. Hollywood has responded by offering us an alternative in other worlds out there. Flannery-Dailey (2003) suggests that films are uniquely qualified to express such a postmodern alternative. Films that offer a multi-layered perspective often draw on numerous religious and philosophical traditions and offer another way of sensing and understanding ultimate reality – be it mind, spirit, intuition or soul. Whatever formula is utilised and whatever religious or philosophical references these films use, they share the assertions that reality is multi-layered, our sensorial reality is unreliable and that we are able to transcend our immediate perceptions in order to access ultimate reality. Therefore films are keeping true to postmodern deconstruction and offering multiple realities bundled together as one solution.

3.5 THE FILMS OF HAYAO MIYAZAKI

3.5.1 Introduction

Hayao Miyazaki is an iconic Japanese filmmaker who has made unforgettable animated feature films and anime. He unashamedly portrays a world where spirits and humans live side by side and manages to introduce complex Eastern spirituality to the Western world. Miyazaki shows numerous folk and Shinto themes in his films and this is in part because Miyazaki feels a “very warm appreciation for the various, very

humble rural Shinto rituals” (Boyd and Nishimura 2004). Miyazaki does not expect the viewer to return to these beliefs but rather wants “that we should all treasure everything because spirits might exist there, and we should treasure everything because there is a kind of life to everything”. Shinto understands the whole of life, human and nature, as creative and life-giving and Miyazaki portrays it as a generative, immanent force that is harmoniously present in the world.

3.5.2 The films

Spirited Away¹⁷

Spirited Away is the story of Chihiro, a young girl, who enters into a spirit world when she and her parents wander into what looks like an abandoned theme park. Her parents eat food that is meant for the spirits and as punishment turn into pigs. Chihiro

¹⁷ <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/CREDITS/SpiritedAway.htm>

Spirited Away DIRECTOR: Hayao Miyazaki	ORIGINAL MUSIC: Joe Hisaishi, Yumi Kimura WRITERS: Cindy Davis Hewitt, Donald H. Hewitt, Hayao Miyazaki
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Atsushi Okui EDITOR: Takeshi Seyama PRODUCERS: Donald W. Ernst, Lori Korngiebel, John Lasseter, Toshio Suzuki, Yasuyoshi Tokuma PRODUCTION COMPANIES: Studio Ghibli [jp], NTV [jp], Dentsu Inc. [jp], Tokuma Shoten [jp], Buena Vista International [jp], Tōhoku Shinsha [jp], Mitsubishi Commercial Affairs DISTRIBUTORS: Toho Company Ltd. [jp], Buena Vista International (Germany) GmbH [de], Buena Vista International Italia [it], Buena Vista International Spain S.A. [es], Buena Vista International [ar], Buena Vista International [fi], Buena Vista International [nl], Buena Vista International [us], Cascade Film [ru], Gativideo [ar], Gaumont Buena Vista International (GBVI) [fr], Ghibli International [jp], Mompole-Pathé [ch], Triangelfilm [se], United International Pictures [UIP], United King Films [il], Universum Film GmbH & Co. KG [de], Walt Disney Pictures [us]	CAST: Rumi Hiragi, Miyu Irino, Mari Natsuki, Takashi Naitō, Yasuko Sawaguchi, Tatsuya Gashuin, Ryunosuke Kamiki, Yumi Tamai DATE OF RELEASE: 2002 COUNTRY: Japan LANGUAGE: Japanese RUNTIME: 125min DISTRIBUTOR DVD: Studio Ghibli COLOR: Color CERTIFICATION: Argentina: Atp/ Australia: PG/ Brazil: Livre/ Canada: PG/ Chile: TE/ Denmark: 7/ Finland: K-7/ France: U/ Germany:o.AI/ Hong Kong: I/ Netherlands: AL/ New Zealand: PG/ Norway: 7/ Portugal: M/6/ Singapore: PG/ South Korea: All/ Spain: T/ Sweden: 7/ Switzerland: 7 (canton of Geneva)/ Switzerland: 7 (canton of Vaud)/ UK: PG/ US: PG

manages to remain in the spirit world with the help of Haku, a young boy, who is also a white dragon and is an ambivalent character portrayed as good and bad.

The centre of the action is a bath house where all the spirits can come and bath and eat, and it is run by an ugly witch called Yubaba. She has to give Chihiro work when she asks and the girl works very hard as a bath house attendant. She lets in a spirit, No Name, by mistake and although it is a 'bad' spirit it helps her successfully bath her first client, a very smelly and dirty creature. The washed spirit turns out to be a river spirit and they clean out all the rubbish that has been put into it. As a reward Chihiro gets a ball that has special properties and she uses it when Haku is hurt when he goes to steal a golden seal from the witch's twin sister. Chihiro tries to help him in spite of many obstacles put in her way. She decides to return the seal to the witch's twin and takes the train across the sea. The witch's twin turns out to be kind and forgiving. Haku arrives as a dragon and Chihiro flies away on his back. During the flight Chihiro remembers when she had met Haku, it was when she had fallen into a river and he had saved her, as he is a river spirit but Yubaba had made him forget his name. Chihiro has to undergo a last test, to identify her parents from a row of pigs. She says that none of them are her parents and as this is the right answer, is allowed to leave. She meets her parents at the entrance and they walk out together not remembering anything. Dust and sticks on the car indicate that something strange had happened but they leave none the wiser.

Spirited Away is a beautiful animated film. The story is charming and the development of Chihiro's character from a frightened little girl to a truly warm-hearted and loving person is wonderful. There is a tradition of villagers calling forth all the local spirits (*kami*) to come and bathe in their baths, and this was the inspiration for the bath house theme. To experience the *kami* presence a person must be like Chihiro, a pure and cheerful heart and mind. This state of being is difficult to

achieve as humans are polluted just as nature can be and this prevents us from being able to connect with it.

Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind¹⁸

This film is the best of Hayao Miyazaki's work that I have seen. The story is moving and meaningful and the animation original and beautiful. Miyazaki based it upon Homer's Nausicaa and a Japanese story "The lady who Loved Insects". True to his preference for a strong female heroine, Nausicaa is a fearless and intelligent figure. The Earth is a wasteland after "the Seven Days of Fire", a holocaust unleashed through war waged with huge robots. Only a few areas remain inhabitable, the rest is covered by the Toxic Jungle. A narrator explains the events that have passed and that a saviour is predicted to come, a winged figure in blue. We are introduced to Nausicaa, flying on her glider. She lands in the jungle and we are shown the beauty of this Toxic Jungle through her eyes. There are giant insects, strange plants, a truly alien world. Nausicaa's character is established: brave, enquiring, intelligent. She does not see nature as threatening and dangerous, but as benevolent and beautiful, potentially of great benefit.

¹⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nausica%C3%A4_of_the_Valley_of_the_Wind_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nausica%C3%A4_of_the_Valley_of_the_Wind_(film))

NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND DIRECTOR: Hayao Miyazaki	ORIGINAL MUSIC: Joe Hisaishi
WRITER: Neil Gaiman, Hayao Miyazaki	CAST: Yôji Matsuda, Uriko Ishida, Yûko Tanaka, Kaoru Kobayashi,
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Hideshi Kyonen	DATE RELEASE: Japan: March 4, 1984; N America: June 1984
EDITOR: Naoki Kaneko, Tomoko Kida, Shiyoji Sakai	COUNTRY: Japan
PRODUCER: Isao Takahata	LANGUAGE: Japanese, English
PRODUCTION COMPANY:	RUNTIME: 116 minutes
DISTRIBUTOR: Toei Company	COLOR: Color (Fujicolor)
DISTRIBUTOR: DVD : The Studio Ghibli Collection	CERTIFICATION: Argentina: 13/ Australia: M/ Canada: 14A/ Finland: K-7/ France: U/ Germany: 12 (w)/ Hong Kong IIA/ Ireland: 12/ Italy: T/ New Zealand: PG/ Portugal: M/6/ South Korea: All/ Spain: 7/ UK: PG/ USA: PG-13

Nausicaa's home is a sheltered valley that depends on the wind to keep the air clean; her people are peaceful and agricultural. Not so the warring Tolmekians who steal a developing giant robot from the Pejites. The ship carrying the giant crashes in the Valley of the Wind and the Tolmekian princess Chushana comes to fetch it, killing the sick king and invading the land. She has been maimed by insects and wants to use the giant robot to destroy the forest.

Chusana takes Nausicaa hostage to fetch reinforcements from her homeland but on the way they are attacked by the Pejites and the ship crashes in the forest. The forest insects, the Ohmus, are very angry and luckily the monstrous creatures send out delicate tentacles to communicate with Nausicaa. She goes to save the Pejite pilot and the two of them fall through a quicksand hole to land under the forest. She realises that the forest is cleansing the air and soil of all the toxins released during the war a long time ago. She also realises that the intention to use the robot to destroy the forest and the insects would be catastrophic. Meanwhile an enormous swarm of Ohmus is crawling towards the valley. The Tolmekians release the giant robot to attack them and he shoots balls of fire at them, killing many but to no avail. The robot itself starts disintegrating and the valley seems doomed. Nausicaa saves the baby Ohmu that is calling the adults and drops in front of the swarm, but they trample her and she is gone. Miraculously just before the swarm reaches the valley, they stop and their anger cools, Nausicaa is gently lifted up on a sea of golden tentacles and the Ohmu revive her. She stands up, a figure in blue with her arms outstretched, fulfilling the prophecy depicted on the tapestry of the saviour of her people and the world.

This film brings across a message of caring for nature in spite of it being dangerous and incomprehensible. It also stresses finding peaceful solutions instead of resorting to war. Through the compassion and selflessness displayed by Nausicaa, the world

can be saved. She is willing to work very hard and if needed, sacrifice herself, but never losing her love and enjoyment of the animals and people who surround her. This is a wonderful message to bring across to the viewer and Miyazaki keeps on challenging the status quo in getting it across, not the least in casting Nausicaa as a female saviour. Insects are shown as useful and beautiful, war and violence as self-defeating. Altruism and love are portrayed as the most effective way to counter destruction and hate.

Princess Mononoke¹⁹

Mononoke means ‘possessed princess’ and this is the theme of the film, the creation of monsters in the world through the destruction and hatred spread by humans. The young hero, Prince Ashitaka, is injured by a demon while trying to save some village girls. He kills the demon but as it dies it curses him. The prince has to leave his village to seek a cure and according to their traditions is no longer able to return. He rides away on his red elk, an outcast and doomed to die. In a village where he is trying to buy food, he is helped by a monk, who tells him that the metal ball that he took

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_Mononoke

PRINCESS MONONOKE	ORIGINAL MUSIC: Joe Hisaishi
DIRECTOR: Hayao Miyazaki WRITER: Neil Gaiman, Hayao Miyazaki,	CAST: Yôji Matsuda, Uriko Ishida, Yûko Tanaka, Kaoru Kobayashi English version: Gillian Anderson, Billy Crudup. Claire Danes, Minnie Driver, Jada Pinkett Smith, Billy Bob Thornton
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Atsushi Okui	DATE OF RELEASE: Japan: July 12, 1997; US: October 29, 1999; Canada: November 26, 1999
EDITOR: Takeshi Seyama	COUNTRY: Japan
PRODUCER: Toshio Suzuki	LANGUAGE: Japanese, English
PRODUCTION COMPANY: Studio Ghibli	RUNTIME: 134 minutes
DISTRIBUTOR: Toho, Miramax Films	COLOR: Color (Fujicolor)
DISTRIBUTOR: Studio Ghibli	CERTIFICATION: Argentina: 13/ Australia: M/ Canada: 14A/ Finland: K-7/ France: U/ Germany: 12 (w)/ Hong Kong IIA/ Ireland: 12/ Italy: T/ New Zealand: PG/ Portugal: M/6/ South Korea: All/ Spain: 7/ UK: PG/ USA: PG-13

from the demon and which was the cause of the demon's anger came from the Lady Eboshi's iron-working town. On the way there a baggage train is attacked by wolves, one of which is a god, Moro. Moro has two sons, white wolves, and a daughter, a human girl called San. They hate the humans who are destroying the forest and killing the animals.

Ashitaka saves two men that fell into the river during the attack and carries them through an enchanted forest, past numerous twirling-headed forest spirits, back to the town. The town is run by the assertive lady Eboshi who uses prostitutes and lepers to make her iron and the guns she wants. Her intention is simple, kill all the animals and chop down the forest so she can make the iron. The people of the town adore her and support her vendetta against the forest. San enters the town intending to kill the lady but Ashitaka stops her and saves her, but in the process also gets shot. He carries San into the forest and almost dies himself. However San takes him to the forest god and the multi-horned deer-like god, with the smiling gentle face, heals him. The transition of the god from his deer shape to his Nightwalker shape, a huge transparent figure lit up with stars, is wonderful.

Unfortunately the Lady Eboshi has joined forces with the monks and soldiers to attempt to cut off the god's head, as this would kill the forest and everything in it, and the Emperor also believes the head will give him eternal life. They entice the last remaining wild boars (from whose ranks came the demon who had cursed Ashitaka) to the village so that the wolves and San would come. They intended to kill or hurt them so that when either Ashitaka or San asked the forest god for help, they would be able to cut his head off. This also comes to pass, the boars get killed, the old giant boar is severely injured and San takes him to the god. Too late she discovers the trick and the lady Eboshi severs the god's head from the body. Instantly the body starts spewing poisonous black goo but the old boar has also turned into a demon and San is

caught in his body. Ashitaka manages to free her but the head is taken away. They chase after it and at the last moment wrestle it away from the monks, and offer it from human hands back to the god. The giant body reattaches his head and the goo stops flowing. But the forest has been destroyed and the god is no longer there to protect it. Plants grow again from the soil but the trees are gone. Ashitaka and San have been healed from the demon curse but San returns to the forest with her wolf brothers and Ashitaka returns to the town, where Lady Eboshi has promised to change.

Princess Mononoke is a very violent film and Miyazaki did not flinch from depicting the destruction of the animals of the forest. The demons are quite terrifying and even the gentle Forest God is a destructive force. In the end these forces all lose, and with their defeat the forest and the animals lose their enchantment too. Humans have wrought this disenchantment and now must live without it all, and somehow try and make amends.

3.5.3 Discussion

All three films discussed above use elements of different religions, as well as themes from traditional tales, modern science fiction and children's literature. Together these elements are woven together into what can be called modern myths, accessible to viewers from all over the world. Miyazaki admits that he is basically a pessimist but prefers to present a vision of hope in his films²⁰. Through his work he articulates the possibility of a mystical connection between humans and nature and displays nostalgia for the world of the past. It is clear from these films that the reality of today's industrialisation and consumer ideology cannot be ignored, but by

²⁰The interview quoted is a report of the debate / press conference Miyazaki gave in Paris in late December 2001, on the occasion of *Spirited Away's* first European screening at the animation festival Nouvelles images du Japon (during which the French government bestowed on him the title of 'Officier des Arts et des Lettres') http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/hayao_miyazaki.shtml [accessed 13/06/2010]

reawakening the sense of wonder that all humans can experience in nature, an alternative worldview is offered.

The Shinto tradition, from where many of the motifs are drawn, came into discredit in the 20th century due to the rise of Japanese imperialism. Miyazaki avoids this by offering a more expansive and global view, including Christian motifs such as the messiac figures of Ashitaka and Nausicaa. The protagonists in his films are often strong, independent young women and his villains tend to be morally ambiguous with redeeming qualities.

Historically, the Japanese have been comfortable with holding a multiplicity of beliefs: Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, along with Shinto, an animistic faith. Shinto is believed to pre-date Japanese history and it is accepted to have no dogma, except for the worship of *kami*, respect for natural features and purification rituals. Wright (2005) says that *kami* are similar to Greek gods, capable of human emotion and accessible to mortal communication. The ancient Japanese did not strictly divide their world into the material and the spiritual, nor between this world and another perfect realm. Wright (2005) quotes Miyazaki as saying in an interview about *Princess Mononoke* that “I’ve come to a point where I just can’t make a film without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem”.

3.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of the films indicates that there are numerous green spiritual themes that can be accessed by the viewer. The most themes use implicit or explicit spiritual images and storylines to tell a specific story or bring a point across. The origins of these spiritual themes can be recognised and are mostly derived from the known faith traditions. To return to the phenomenological description by Waaijman (in De Villiers

et al. 2006:5, as discussed in Chapter II) the spirituality seen in these films can be described as accessing many different levels of experience. He describes the primordial spiritualities as expressed in the lived reality of their practitioners (recognised in the Na'vi in *Avatar*, the Invisible People in *Emerald Forest* and the Lakota Sioux in *Dances With Wolves*). Indigenous spiritualities such as these have not been transformed by dominant theological traditions and thus can be sourced for spiritual insight and worldviews not present in modern society.

Secular spiritualities which are emancipated from religious dominance, as possibly experienced by the viewers of the films, are able to access multiple layers of meaning-making, including those expressed in indigenous spirituality. This interaction between viewer and media is crucial in the formation of green spirituality. Certain aspects of spiritual counter-movements as described by Waaijman (in De Villiers *et al.* 2006:11) are also recognisable, especially the liminal spirituality based on the rites of passage, present in all the films discussed.

I want to suggest that many films of diverse genres articulate an understanding of a multi-layered reality, using a myriad of meaning-makers or signifiers²¹. Flannery-Dailey (2003) describes the depiction of signs or signifiers (objects the viewer sees) in films as pointing to multiple significations (multiple meanings construed by the viewers) and this attribute allows viewers to actively participate in creating meaning in a layered text. Due to postmodernism's fragmentary nature though, there are layers being placed upon each other. Each layer and strand of possibility points the viewer towards important questions worthy of deep consideration.

²¹ A signifier is a meaningful visual or auditory element in a film. I used Steve Campsall's helpful list of terms used in film analysis. 27/06/2002 (Rev.17/12/2005;14:18:24) Media – GCSE Film Analysis Guide (3) –SJC <http://www.englishbiz.co.uk/downloads/filmanalysis.pdf> [accessed 11/11/2010]

For example in Miyazaki's films numerous scenes introduce the viewer to the spiritual themes in the films: the little spirit houses leaning against a tree, the *tori* or gateway that the family drive past, and the rounded stone statues set up everywhere. In order to move to this liminal realm represented by these symbols one has to be cleansed, wiped clean of external and internal pollution. In the film *Spirited Away* Chihiro also encounters the *kami* of plants and animals, extremely creatively depicted by the artists, and indicating the presence of *kami* in all things and phenomena. Miyazaki often uses trees to signify *kami* and ancestors.

The tree is used to portray the spirit of the Earth (a theme also used to great effect in *Avatar*). It is an ancient symbol for continuity and sacrality of life, also used in western pagan religions. The tree is profoundly important in Shinto cosmology as it is symbolic of the *kami*'s most highly venerated powers of productivity and fertility. Wright (2005) believes that the characters in Miyazaki's films manifest ideas about a non-intellectual understanding of spirituality that allows it to stand alone from institutionalised religion and therefore these films can be sourced for green spirituality.

Different types of signifiers: visual, cognitive, spiritual and communal, as found in the films considered, can be used to describe green spirituality that accentuates personal experience, theological pluralism and spiritual growth through experiences of the natural environment rather than through attachment to an established religious normality. Therefore I have summarised the four types of signifiers of green spirituality that I identified in the films: visual, cognitive, spiritual and communal, in Tables A to D. Following on from these I expand the discussion by presenting in Tables E and F green spirituality as a different perspective and as present in symbolism and beliefs.

The most important signifiers are as follows:

A. Visual

1. The experience of pristine nature
2. The experience of destruction caused by humans

B. Cognitive

3. The transition from ignorance/unbelief to wisdom/belief
4. Spirituality v. science

C. Spiritual

5. The action of spiritual forces
6. Rebirth through water – water as a spiritually significant element
7. Healing and resurrection

D. Communal

8. Community as a place of spirituality
9. Rites of passage
10. Respect for other beings

These different signifiers were found to be present in all the films reviewed and therefore present a basis for comparison between them. The recognition of such commonalities between the films also allows one to establish a platform from which to analyse and evaluate the films.

A. Visual signifiers. In this category the films have a visual impact which may resonate with the viewer on a spiritual level. This form of signifier plays a dominant role in the expression of green spirituality in the films.

Table A: Visual	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
The experience of pristine nature	The human destruction on Pandora contrasted to the forest in the opening sequences. Stunning visuals of the goodness of Pandora.	The rain forest as unique and beautiful, not dangerous. Beautiful and interesting nature – ants, jaguar, sloth.	Spectacular vistas of plains and endless horizons bring home the beauty of the landscape, the grassy plains of South Dakota. Indian spirituality as a way of life, in harmony with each other and the environment.	Earth is portrayed in a deep ecological crisis. At the end of the film everything human-made stops. The last shot is of the eerily still world. A flock of birds fly across the sky, a vision of what can be.	Remnants are found in all the films but all have been impacted by humans. <i>Nausicaa</i> : the Toxic Forest is in fact beautiful and beneficial.
The experience of destruction caused by humans	Human destruction of the forest through mining activities: mirrored in the real world. The destruction of the Home Tree. The military with their weapons and cruelty.	Destructive dam building. White people called “termite people”. The world outside the rain forest is called the “Dead World” by the Indians: “they are taking off her skin, how will she breathe?”	The buffalo herd is wastefully killed by the whites. The military kill the buffalo, the Indians and the horse and the wolf and are cruel to Dunbar. The Indians do not understand the rapaciousness and greed of the whites.	The world as we know it. The film alludes to the destruction but assumes that the viewer knows what is happening. The military who try to kill the aliens. Klaatu: “if the humans die, the earth will survive”.	In <i>Spirited Away</i> : The world of the <i>kami</i> ceases to exist in the disenchanted world. In <i>Nausicaa</i> : The Earth is a wasteland after “the Seven Days of Fire”. The Earth is covered by the “Toxic Jungle”. In <i>Princess</i> : the monks and military kill. The lady Eboshi’s town.

B. Cognitive signifiers. In this category the films have a more intellectual impact which may resonate with the viewer when they experience understanding.

Table B: Cognitive	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
The transition from ignorance/unbelief to wisdom/belief	Jake shows the slow transition from unbelief to belief/ from ignorance to wisdom through the training by Nyteri and immersion in the natural world of Pandora. He learns to “see”. Augustine learns that Eywa is “real”.	Daddee learns that the forest is a world that his son prefers. Tommee learning the ways of the city in his quest to save Kachiri. Harmony and wisdom through life in the forest.	Dunbar is cut off from “civilisation”, has died to the world. He becomes an Indian through learning from Christine and the Indians and by immersing himself in the land.	Klaatu’s transition from unfeeling alien to an understanding being. He learns from Benson and by watching humans. He has much knowledge but needs to learn empathy. Jakob learns from Klaatu. Benson learns to live in the present, with love.	<i>Spirited away</i> : Chihiro’s character is a frightened little girl and becomes a warm-hearted and loving person. She is helped by Haku the boy/river spirit and other characters. <i>Nausicaa</i> learns from the forest. She teaches others. <i>Princess</i> : San learns from Ashitaka to be less hate-filled.
Spirituality v. science	Augustine: : “I’m not talking about some pagan voodoo here, I’m talking about something real, measurable in the biology of the forest ... It’s a global network and the Na’vi can access it. They can upload and download data, memories” Translating spirituality into scientific language.	The forest v. the dam – even large engineering projects such as a dam can be destroyed by spiritual forces (the water spirit).	The Indian beliefs are shown to be better than those of the whites since Dunbar and Christine prefer to remain Indian.	Klaatu is science as a religion – his power is that of a god but it is based on science. He has the power to heal or destroy - the robot figure starts to disintegrate into millions of tiny nano-bots which are able to consume anything.	The presence of <i>kami</i> in all things and phenomena. <i>Nausicaa</i> : Insects are shown as useful and beautiful, war and violence as self-defeating; altruism and love as the way to stop hate and destruction. <i>Princess</i> : In the end the spiritual forces all lose, and with their defeat the forest and the animals lose their enchantment too.

C. Spiritual signifiers. In this category the films may resonate with the viewer on a spiritual level and allow recognition of alternative worldviews.

Table C: Spiritual level	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
The action of spiritual forces	<p>Lots of Soul Tree seeds sitting on Jake indicating he is the chosen one.</p> <p>Eywa's interference by motivating the other beings on the planet to fight back.</p>	<p>Dreams as powerful spiritual guides.</p> <p>The snake seen at important times.</p>	<p>Dunbar rides out on a pale horse and surrenders himself to the enemy fire with outstretched arms: miraculously he does not die.</p> <p>The wolf as a distraction before it is shot.</p>	<p>Klaatu is a scientific form of spiritual force.</p> <p>Human love transcends evil as shown through Benson's love for Jacob.</p>	<p><i>Spirited Away: Kami Nausicaa</i>: She is the saviour and takes a cruciform pose she assumes when saving the young Ohmu.</p> <p><i>Princess</i>: The creation of monsters in the world through the destruction and hatred spread by humans. The Forest God has special powers. The demons can curse and kill. The forest spirits show Ashitaka the way.</p>
Rebirth through water – water as a spiritually significant element	<p>Jake falls into the water/ loses his human baggage and is reborn into the forest.</p>	<p>Water as a rebirthing medium – Tommee's coming of age and his father being immersed in the rainforest and shedding his city life.</p>	<p>Dunbar swims in the pond near the post after removing a dead elk from the water and emerges naked to see Kicking Bird stealing his horse – this scares the Indian away but is the beginning of his interaction with the Indians.</p>	<p>Klaatu saves Jakob from falling off a bridge and starts to trust him, the bridge representing the point when Klaatu is passing into an attitude of forgiveness.</p>	<p><i>Spirited Away</i>: The bathhouse as place of cleansing. Chihiro has to pass over the ocean in the train to reach the other witch to be saved/forgiven.</p> <p><i>Princess</i>: Ashitaka and San swim through the water to the island of the forest god.</p>

Table C: continued	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
Healing and resurrec- tion	Healing as communal ritual, combining the human element with the planet, with tendrils growing over Augustine. She dies but confirms the transition from scientific positivism to spiritual connection/ belief. Jake becomes melded with his avatar body.	Healing of Daddee through drawing the fever from him but also shown as a trick – leaving the viewer to decide what is true or not.	Dunbar’s spiritual healing. After his cruel treatment by the soldiers he is saved from death by the Sioux warriors.	Klaatu has a healing substance to heal his chest wound. It is also used to reanimate/ resurrect the policeman. The cloud of nano-bots attack Jacob and Benson but Klaatu saves them by holding their hands and taking the nano-bots into his own body.	<p><i>Spirited Away:</i> Chihiro heals Haku using a ball given to her by the river spirit that she bathed.</p> <p><i>Nausicaa:</i> Nausicaa is lifted up on a sea of golden tentacles and the Ohmu revive her. She stands up, a figure in blue with her arms outstretched, fulfilling the prophesy of saviour of her people and the world.</p> <p>In <i>Princess Mononoke</i> the multi-horned deer-like forest god, with the smiling gentle face, heals Ashitaka.</p>

D. Communal signifiers. In this category the films show an alternative view of communal life and spiritual activities taking place which may resonate with the viewer. Ruether (1996:46) says that “spirituality affirms the individual in the context of the community. Spirituality in the context of cultural diversity shapes the way in which we see the world, remembering the teachings of our ancestors, and recovering the equilibrium between cosmos and humanity.” A viewer of these signifiers in film understands them within the context of his or her own community. Consistency of understanding depends on the personal moment of receptivity, and it may be experienced in common with others who have approached the viewing experience with similar patterns of experience and thought processes (Wall 2002:26).

Table D: Communal	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
Community as place of spirituality	<p>The rites at the Soul Tree show the whole tribe joining in a powerful ritual of communion and healing. Powerful spiritual leaders in the Na'vi.</p> <p>The Soul Tree as the spiritual centre of the Na'vi people.</p>	<p>Indian rituals shown in Tommee's manhood ritual, in the wedding ceremony; the funeral release of spirit by fire and communal drinking of ashes.</p>	<p>The Sioux dance around the fire in the Sun Dance or Ghost Dance, a ritual to induce trance and reach the deceased relations.</p> <p>Wedding between Dunbar and Christine.</p>	<p>Modern society as a primitive society compared to the aliens, and is shown as harmful and destructive but also as having positive qualities in family ties and care/love.</p>	<p><i>Spirited Away</i>: the food put out for the spirits/ inviting them to bath/ spirit houses. Love for parents enables Chihiro to save them all.</p> <p><i>Nausicaa</i>: The Valley of the Wind is a loving and caring community. The Ohmu care for each other.</p> <p><i>Princess</i>: There is companionship and care in Lady Eboshi's village. San is loved and nurtured by the wolves and in turn takes care of them.</p>
Rites of passage	<p>Jake's initiation/ rites of passage/ primitive spiritual rites "the Na'vi say everyone is born twice, the second time when you win your place among the people forever."</p>	<p>Tommee's coming of age ritual – he has to suffer and die to become a man to be part of the adult community.</p>	<p>Dunbar rejects the white civilisation and calls himself Dances with Wolves after being beaten when he returns to the fort to get his diary; he suffers and becomes a different person, an Indian?</p>	<p>Benson becomes reconciled with her life on Earth with Jakob; she goes through suffering to be a better person.</p> <p>Klaatu becomes more understanding after suffering.</p>	<p><i>Spirited Away</i>: Chihiro becomes hard-working and brave, warm-hearted after the anguish of losing her parents.</p> <p><i>Nausicaa</i>: Kills soldiers in anger but this teaches her that hatred is wrong.</p> <p><i>Princess</i>: Ashitaka's liminality enables him to play a salvific role that may be recognised cross-culturally as sacred or holy.</p>

Table D: continued	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
Respect for other beings	Nyateri kills alien dogs to save Jake and releases their spirits while she expresses her emphatic denial of the killing being good; being part of a larger community of life.	The Indian tribes are in harmony with their world and kill only what they need, and use only what the forest provides.	Two Socks, the wolf is Dunbar's companion. Cisco the horse is a personality and helper. The buffalo are hunted but not wasted by the Indians. Both human and non-human components are valuable.	No respect: "You treat the world as you treat each other." The only monsters are the humans who want to destroy the messenger. No sense of all beings sharing one space and therefore Klaatu wants to remove the animals.	<i>Spirited Away</i> : Even the smelliest spirit is bathed. <i>Nausicaa</i> : Nausicaa reveres all forms of life. The Ohmu are treated with love and compassion, the baby Ohmu is saved. <i>Princess</i> : Ashitaka helps whoever is in need, human or non-human. The evil old boar is taken to be healed, in spite of the danger of being cursed.

In Tables E and F I want to present two more important issues. The first (Table E) considers that the world can also be seen from a different perspective as a number of the films discussed are representations of a spirituality which are popularly associated with peoples or societies who are in a good relationship with their life-worlds. These aspects are not discussed in depth, not in the films nor in this study. It is perhaps excusable when one considers the nature of the material I am discussing, by and large commercial products aimed at mass consumption, with little pretension to being accurate or authentic. The value of these films lies in the interaction between the viewer and the images presented, rather than the 'truth' the viewer can access and take home. The films are not 'true' depictions of reality, however, neither are documentaries which show a perfect snapshot of some exotic place or animal. Just as these serve to show something extraordinary and in great contrast to the viewer's lived

reality, so the films that have been discussed can open the door to an understanding of a world where all are part of the ‘web of life’.

Table E: Green spirituality as a different perspective	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
Modern society v. natural world	Destruction of the Home Tree similar to the destruction of the rain forest but also of the 9/11 New York Twin Towers, showing the connection between the forest and our human cities – both can be destroyed. The battle of humans and their machines against the Na’vi and animals/Eywa.	The Great Anaconda – spirit snake/ water - destroys the dam. “They still know what we have forgotten”.	No longer did one see the West as a place to be “tamed” but rather as a place where the ‘civilised’ could be taught and changed.	Modern society destroys through use of technology, instead of preserving and being in harmony with nature. Alien society is post-modern and restores the natural world by disabling everything mechanical – a reversion to pre-modern society.	<i>Nausicaa</i> : The philosophy of care and respect displayed by Nausicaa can save her world from destruction. <i>Princess</i> : Lady Eboshi’s iron-working town shows the destructive and polluting nature of such industry. Destruction of the forest and the animals yet there are still remnants left. Humans have wrought this disenchantment and now must live without it all, and somehow try and make amends.

In the last table, Table F, I want to present the symbolism and belief systems that the viewer is introduced to. This is probably the area which could cause the most problems in terms of showing images incompatible with orthodox belief systems. As I mentioned in the beginning of this study, I will work on the premise that there is a

dynamic interaction between media and user and that this interaction flows both ways, as proposed by Hoover (2006) and Roof (2001) amongst others.

Table F: Symbolism and beliefs	Avatar	Emerald Forest	Dances with Wolves	The Day the Earth stood Still	Hayao Miyazaki
Symbolism	Jake Sully, is cast as a saviour. The main ‘baddie’ Quaritch has a battleship bearing a dragon symbol. The dragon represents the destructive power. It is the earth that rescues the woman (the people of God) from the power of chaos.	Snake as symbol of the water spirit which ultimately destroys the dam.	Dunbar riding in front of the enemy lines with arms outstretched- a saviour. Diary as document of truth. Spiritual messages via the landscape and the wolf. The wolf gave trust and friendship but dies for ‘love’.	Klaatu as saviour is feared, abused, imprisoned, forced to flee military and political stupidity. A stranger scorned. He heals, he resurrects, he comes to save us from ourselves.	<i>Spirited Away</i> : Chihiro as the saviour or is it Haku? shrines, spirit houses, statues. <i>Nausicaa</i> : Fulfills the prophesy of a saviour, the winged figure in blue with arms outstretched. <i>Princess</i> : the giant star-studded Nightwalker shape of the Forest God.
Beliefs	The Na’vi believe that “a network of energy that flows through all living things, all energy is borrowed”. Those who have died are also still present. The deity Eywa never speaks or is seen yet she is an immanent god.	Spirit animal revealed through drug-induced trance – shamanist ritual. Frogs can call the rain. The Spirit Snake is angry and powerful.	Sioux belief of time being non-linear but constant. Removal of wrong elements would restore harmony.	Benson is a seeker, a secular humanist who practices science as a form of religion. With the arrival of the alien, her belief becomes a reality, and she is ready to help the aliens.	Shinto and rural animist traditions mixed with Christian and Buddhist images. Demons and forest god. River spirits. Local spirits (<i>kami</i>) are invited to come and bathe. To experience the <i>kami</i> presence a person must be like Chiharo, a pure and cheerful heart and mind.

Here it is important to remember that in spite of the alien and even unacceptable beliefs shown, every media user selects, rejects or accepts, questions and enjoys within a web of communication and also undertakes a potentially endless series of other

decoding activities in the construction of spiritual or religious meaning-making. To use the word ‘constructs’ implies that every individual is an active subject, trying to create a meaningful world in everyday life so that he or she can interact with this environment and with other people in a coherent way. Each individual is a complex mixture of personal and social identities, and every person uses and accesses many codes in their quest for self-understanding. Therefore every person actively seeks symbols that will be relevant to his or her identity at any given moment and this implies that these symbols are changeable. In addition to accessing this alternative reality, mass media also mirror social symbols, and do play a role in their legitimisation, which in turn have the ability to create worldviews and make these visible in the public sphere.

In Europe, religion is seldom mentioned, not even amongst those that are ‘doing’ theology. Therefore there are limited spaces where such themes can be explored. Any theology that wants to remain relevant in today’s world needs to acknowledge the role the media play in modern society’s process of meaning-making. Hermann (2002:78) points out that popular films are not simply a portrayal of society’s daydreams but also mirror and produce the religion such a society may have. The depiction of signs or signifiers in films point to multiple significations (multiple meanings construed by the viewers) and allows viewers to actively participate in creating meaning. Due to postmodernism’s fragmentary nature though, there are layers being placed upon each other. Each layer and strand of possibility points the viewer towards important questions worthy of deep consideration. Jewett (1999:3) quotes Hansen in saying that films have become the medium through which stories are told that reflect society’s problems and through them people can reflect and “renegotiate the meaning of everyday experience, of changes, transformations of the world they live in”.

Other authors such as Deacy (2005:26) point out that “this very illusory quality ... seems to preclude theological reading – for such films bear no relation to external reality, but only to a fantasy of how one would like reality to be.” He believes that the relief offered by such films is only temporary, and serious theological reflection “does not consist of an identification with a merely transitory, ephemeral wish-fulfilment realm”. But even Deacy does conclude that “it is possible that all manner of new and innovative ways of ‘doing’ theology ... can be encountered” (2005:137). I agree with Deacy that it is extremely significant that a ‘secular’ medium such as the films has the capacity to raise vital questions about the spiritual landscape and normative values of western society.

Most filmmakers do not access postmodernism or semiotics when producing a film, but express what society already feels but has not yet fully recognised. Postmodern thinking has emerged as an expression of dissatisfaction with ‘progress’ and critiques technology, capitalism, nationalism and urban life as expressions of absolutes. Flannery-Dailey (2003) says that viewers sense discordance within their reality and films express this disjointedness. There is a rejection of a “singular, flat reality in favour of other planes of perception, existence or being”. Through special effects such as computer animation, blue screen, digitisation, etc. films also convey a sense of multiple planes of reality, recognisable by the audience in the altered perception of time offered when viewing a film.

The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that there has been a “move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others” and calls this the post-Durkheimian dispensation (Taylor 2007:1). He writes that there is a change in the way people view the world and the belief systems they use to make meaning of it. Naive assent to religious claims common five hundred years ago is no longer an option, and there are

no longer clear foundations to establish the possibility of religious belief and the balance and sense it brings to human lives (Taylor 2007:5). The great diversity that characterises our spiritual world leads to the proliferation of middle ways, between ways of unbelief and belief: “a believing without belonging” (2007:518). To explain the opposition of mainline Christianity to Alternative Spiritualities such as the New Age movement, Taylor goes back to the conflict 500 years ago between the Jansenists and the Jesuits. He believes that these two kinds of religious sensibility: those who are on a spiritual quest and those who opt for an authority, still remain in opposition. He regrets the fact that these are hardened by various doctrines into polar opposites. Such changes in the religious landscape means that more people would either profess to be atheist or some intermediate position.

There is an assumption that media are able to compel action or engage or articulate beliefs in powerful ways. Hoover (2006:205) points out though that this view is rooted in an erroneous belief that the viewer is merely a passive recipient of images and texts, whereas in fact each viewer is an active agent in his or her meaning-making process. Films such as *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest* and *Dances with Wolves* have an easily understandable message of ‘something out there’, “that maybe in the enjoying of it, it makes you think a little about the way you interact with nature and your fellow man”²². The animated films of Hayao Miyazaki present an alternative worldview in a similar enjoyable fashion.

In this new worldview it is recognised that each and every life-form needs space for its own physical needs as well as the understanding that all exist together in this space. Complex networks of interrelationship and interdependence mean that

²² James Cameron, writer and producer of *Avatar*, made this statement at the Comicon 2009, as reported in the Boston Herald, Press Associated July, 24, 2009 news.bostonherald.com/.../20090724james_cameron_wows_comic_con_with_3-d_avatar/ [accessed 12/06/2010]

encroaching on the space of others leads to diminishment and death. Therefore I see the role of media as making a significant contribution in the enabling of a paradigm shift in how human beings see their relationship with nature.

Such a paradigm shift entails a change in understanding through the recognition of green spiritual themes via the following signifiers:

- 1) Visual: The images of pristine nature are contrasted with the destruction caused by humans.
- 2) Cognitive: The transition made by the protagonists in the films from ignorance or unbelief to wisdom and belief. The questioning of the scientific positivistic point of departure in modern thinking.
- 3) Spiritual: Scenes offering alternative forces of power influencing events. The awe-inspiring forces present in nature in the water-bodies and forests on Earth; and the deep healing powers present in humanity.
- 4) Communal: A move away from individualism to see community as a source of strength and spirituality, and the acknowledgement of the rights of other species and environments.

In addition, the viewers can access alternative worldviews via the films as well as experience the symbolism and beliefs in different belief systems.

CHAPTER IV

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter II a brief overview of the concepts within whose context this study takes place was presented. In order to situate the study I defined and described the key terms: spirituality; green spirituality; ecological crisis; ecological ethic; ecofeminism; deep ecology; and eco-theology. Using these definitions and concepts I have described the spiritual and ecological signifiers found in the films considered and have analysed how these can and do form part of the meaning-making in our postmodern society (Chapter III), and I have called this form of meaning-making green spirituality. I propose that this green spirituality could assist in enabling faith traditions to embrace an ecological ethic; to support policies and activities that will not harm the Earth's natural systems.

In terms of the method followed (Chapter I), the principles of practical theology, I have examined the "world as it is" by means of the literature review in Chapter II and conducted a critical analysis of the data (the films) in Chapter III. In Chapter IV I continue the study by identifying the existing responses of faith traditions to the ecological crisis. Thus this chapter describes current responses by faith traditions on the basis of an analysis of the literature. I also situate the green spiritual signifiers found in the films in the various faith traditions. The response to the ecological crisis is evaluated and a deepening of this response is offered via some practical suggestions.

4.2 THE RESPONSES OF THE FAITH TRADITIONS

It is important to determine how faith traditions regard the ecological crisis and how they are translating this into praxis, as the purpose of this study is to evaluate the

situation and to offer some suggestions. Many of the world faith traditions contain important resources that can be used to promote ecological values and practice.

In contrast to perhaps twenty or thirty years ago, attitudes to the ecological crisis today are marked by awareness and involvement. There seems to be a general shift from non-involvement and suspicion to awareness on all levels. The question remains as to why, when the answers are to be found in tradition, has modernity so easily sidelined them?

4.2.1 Christianity

Although the producers of the films discussed in Chapter III do not express their possible religious points of departure, those films which are produced in the United States cannot escape their immersion in Christianity and, as mentioned before, even producer Hayao Miyazaki uses Christian images. The Christian symbolism shown in the films is very diverse and fragmentary but easily recognisable. The main protagonist in *Avatar*, Jake Sully, is cast as a saviour and displays the typical characteristics of the hero of a 'coming-of-age' narrative, as he goes through the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation (Aichele and Walsh 2002:79) and as described by Waaijman (Chapter II) as liminal spirituality. *Dances With Wolves* casts the hero in a similar role and the films of Hayao Miyazaki cast a strong female in the role of a saviour. The main protagonist of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a woman (a Mary Magdalene/Mary figure) who goes through the transition to self-understanding (liminal spirituality) and a strong Christological, pre-apocalyptic theme is present throughout the film.

In terms of the approaches to the ecological crisis, the diversity of Christian faith communities is matched by the diversity in approaches and involvement. In the

Christian faith communities there are distinct ways of explaining a theological rationale to heal the earth. These may be covenantal and sacramental theologies as described by Ruether (Hessel and Ruether 2000) or apologetic and eschatological approaches as described by Haught (1993). Immanent and Earth-friendly theologies need to be discerned and developed, especially those that include an understanding of our interdependence with all life forms, the transience of selves and the value of each living being (“ecological spirituality”, Ruether 1992:5) . Along with a number of prominent theologians, Juergen Moltmann (Louw 1998:114) suggests rediscovering God in creation. He believes that the Christian Trinitarian model can open up new avenues for reflection on the relationship between God and creation.

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) provides a brief list of the Christian theological trends which can be recognised in South Africa today and which may have impact on their approach towards environmental issues (SACC 2009:12):

- 1. Mastery theology:** This theology is based on Genesis 1:27 to “subdue the earth” and to “rule over it”. It builds on Psalm 8 where humans are described as the “crown of creation” and suggests that God created the entire universe for the sake of human beings and therefore resources can be used regardless. Sometimes such a mastery theology is tempered by a theology of dominion or stewardship to encourage wise and frugal use. The notion of ‘stewardship’ is widely promoted by the Christian churches, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition, as expressed in the Papal Address on the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2008.²³ But, as Smith (1997:61) explains through her discussion of the Columbian missionary priest

²³ The Pope said: “The family needs a home, a fit environment in which to develop its proper relationships. For the human family, this home is the earth, the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. We need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion.” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace_en.html accessed 11/11/2010

Sean McDonagh's work, this may be useful to formulate human responsibility but fails in the implied 'proprietary rights' of humans over the universe.

2. **Escapist theologies:** These theologies encourage Christians to resist the reduction of the Christian faith to a social agenda of worldly concerns. They emphasise that which is more spiritual than material, soul more than body, heaven more than earth, the life to come more than this life. Therefore the attention paid to ecological issues is of no value for the hereafter. For many in the evangelical community, taking a public stand on environmental issues such as global warming is not part of their faith. When 86 evangelical leaders put their names to the February 2006 statement entitled "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action", it was swiftly forestalled by the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance (lead by Charles Colson and James Dobson) exhorting them not to adopt an official stand.²⁴ Evangelicals seem to prefer a gospel of "creation care", inspired by the stewardship scriptures.
3. **Inculturation theologies:** These theologies encourage accepting our modern context and means that Christians may embrace various expressions of consumer culture as given by God. The World Council of Churches (2008:4) points out that "the very structures and methods set in place to create wealth – often legitimated by the sociocultural and religious status quo – could, at the same time, be responsible for producing poverty and inequality."
4. **Blaming theologies:** These theologies tend to find others to blame for the problems on Earth. It is acceptable to believe that some may be more guilty than others as the gospel of forgiveness is proclaimed to all. However, even a

²⁴ The debate within the evangelical community soon hit the public consciousness, with articles in leading magazines.http://www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/print/religionandenvironmentclass_print.html accessed 11/11/2010

superficial look at the world today shows that each human being does not bear equal responsibility to the evils present, and some may even being victims and perpetrators simultaneously.

5. **The prosperity gospel:** The prosperity gospel distorts truth in the belief that financial success is a reflection of God's blessings. Gratitude for God's blessings includes being grateful for money but it can become a heresy if money is the sign of the authenticity of one's faith.

In addition to this discussion within the Christian faith, there is a need to engage with other religious traditions. The problems of poverty, wealth and ecology need to be addressed in a global context as Christians cannot simply contemplate or comprehend the world as it is but must contribute to the world becoming what God intends it to be, as those intentions have been interpreted by the great theistic traditions. The World Council of Churches (WCC) is taking a leadership position by addressing the issues of poverty, wealth and ecology in a global context. The WCC has issued numerous publications, including *"Poverty, Wealth and Ecology: the impact of economic globalization a background to the study process"* (2008), which aims at creating a framework how to approach the Alternative Globalisation Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE) ²⁵ process in studying poverty, wealth and ecology. In the AGAPE background document: "Churches are challenged to join in the struggle for justice by resisting unjust and destructive powers and by working to build an AGAPE society across religious faiths, cultures and social movements, whether the struggle is local, regional, continental or global."

²⁵ The AGAPE (Alternative Globalisation Addressing People and Earth) process began at the Eight Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, engaging churches and specialised ministries in addressing poverty and inequity <http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p3/agape-new.pdf> accessed 22/06/2008

Leading up to the Tenth Assembly of the WCC in 2013, churches will engage in consultative research on poverty, wealth and ecology in all continents and following an established ecumenical calendar. There is consensus that the problems of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation all are connected and are perpetuated in the consumer society and its value systems.

The churches are called to bring the “good news to the poor” and to speak prophetic truth to the wealthy and powerful (WCC 2008:14). This means working for transformations in the prevailing unjust economic and political orders at global, national and local levels as well as in the churches and private lives. The AGAPE background document is very clear that “churches and congregations should care for the web of life and the rich bio-diversity of creation”. In the South African context, Ackermann and Joyner (in Ruether 1996:124) speak of “green Christians”, pointing out that as over seventy percent of South Africans claim to be Christians, the church could be “an agent fostering the mass environmental awareness so desperately needed in South Africa”.

The SACC has made important contributions to addressing the ecological crisis, significantly in terms of climate change. These are outlined in the 2009 publication “*Climate Change – A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*”. The SACC sees climate change as a moral, cultural and spiritual challenge: “the problem lies not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, in our attitudes, aspirations and orientations, in our priorities, habits, practices and institutions” (SACC 2009:6). The publication even goes as far as to call climate change “a new ‘kairos’ – a moment of truth and of opportunity”.

4.2.2 Judaism

In the movie *Avatar*, the Tree of Souls is the most sacred place for the Na'vi, echoing Jewish mythology. Schwartz (2004: 164) describes a Cabbalistic Tree of Life where God has a tree of flowering souls in paradise. In Judaism one finds an endorsement of the view that people are stewards of God's creation that is similar to some Christian interpretations. However, it seems to concentrate on specifics with detailed instructions on right behaviour. Dietrich (in Ruether 1996:95) mentions that the Torah has a deep perception of the reality that the Earth belongs to God. This concept is expressed in Leviticus 25:23 as the Jubilee year, cancelling all debts and land sales: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me". Gordis (in VanDer Veer and Pierce 2003:65) tells of the principle of *bal tashkit* which is the recognition that every natural object is an embodiment of the creative power of God and is therefore sacred (see also E Schwartz 1995) . Social activist Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Jewish scholar Art Green propose an 'eco-kosher'²⁶ where traditional Jewish laws of *kashrut* can be extended to environmental matters.

4.2.3 Buddhism

Some of the scenes in *Avatar* remind one of Tibetan Buddhist mandalas, where intricate circular patterns are created by a network of bodies and natural features. In Buddhism neither mind nor body has reality. Therefore the mind-body dualism that haunts Christianity is avoided. However, another kind of dualism is in practice: the dualism between *samsara* (the world of desire, frustration and illusion) and *nirvana*

²⁶ "Eco-Kosher Movement Aims To Heed Tradition, Conscience" By Alan Cooperman Washington Post Staff Writer Saturday, July 7, 2007 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/06/AR2007070602092.html> accessed 11/11/2010

(enlightenment). Buddhism does not endorse this in theory, but the enormous value placed on monasteries and temples and the consequent focus on spiritual self-absorption and detachment, does have the result in practice. Holder (2007:113) notes that research has shown that the key claims of 'Green Buddhism' do not accurately reflect the doctrines of the early Buddhist tradition. Early Buddhists placed no value on nature because the natural world was for them nothing more than a place of "suffering, decay, death and impermanence". In spite of this, Holder does believe that he can identify a 'naturalistic' interpretation of early Buddhist texts which posits a continuity between human beings and nature. He does not equate this with Green Buddhism's doctrine of universal mutual causality (Indra's net) where each existing thing is interdependent with all other phenomena in the entire universe.

Contemporary Buddhist concern with ecology attempts to overcome this problem but is often rejected by traditional monks. In contrast to Christianity, Buddhist eco-theologians do not have to engage with their religion's theology of nature but with its deep-seated social quietism (Gottlieb 2006:35). Ecologically-minded Buddhists now employ doctrines of interdependence and compassion to extend concern to nature, for example a concept of 'eco-karma'.

4.2.4 Hinduism

James Cameron took the title of the film *Avatar* from the Hindu term describing an incarnation of a god in a fleshly form, and the blue skin colour of the Na'vi reminds one of the Hindu god Vishnu. However, Hinduism is far more complex and often more a political category than a religious one. On a political level, Gandhian contributions to the development of the Green movement (Cox 2004:105) drew consistently from religious traditions, but also engaged in constant reinterpretation. Vandana Shiva is a leading figure in the revival of Gandhian frameworks in social and environmental

action. In terms of eco-feminist critical readings, Indian feminist theologians have to challenge the assumption that suffering is god-given, and rather consider Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the universe. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, fisherwomen are mostly Catholic but they tap a heritage including the sea goddess Kandamma. A critical examination of the Hindu tradition is necessary to identify the patriarchal and hierarchical teachings (Bonvillain 2007:148) and the insidious violence and deprivation still prevalent in them.

4.2.5 Shintoism, shamanism and rural animist traditions

These faith traditions are relevant to the discussion of Hayao Miyazaki's films. He unabashedly admits to drawing much of his material from these sources and admires the way they make sense of their life-world. Although Shinto is an amalgam of Japanese folk religions and Chinese religions and philosophies, its worldview has remained relatively stable (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003:180). Shinto truly admires care for others, including for natural things, as is shown so beautifully in *Spirited Away*. However, Shinto is also a pragmatic belief and shrines are found even in the most environmentally-unfriendly companies and this is touched upon in *Princess Mononoke* where the economically and socially successful iron-working town of Lady Eboshi ultimately destroys the forest.

Shamanism in the East is a belief system dealing with *han*, the deep sense of injustice, under which especially women suffer in the East. This worldview is also applicable in the environmental discourse as the empowerment of women through the release of *han* is a powerful tool in Korean religious traditions, including Christianity. The dispersal of *han* restores the health and well-being of the individual and the community (Pui-lan 2000:88). Korean feminist theologians have taken note of the

concept of *han* and of a female Christ in their scholarship, noting that there are also oppressive aspects in shamanism, such as patriarchal elements and individualism.

4.2.6 Faith traditions of African people

Most modern South Africans are Christian (according to the census statistics of 2001 as reported in the South African Christian Handbook 2007-2008) yet a large number do also retain other beliefs. These include belief in ancestral spirits, the 'evil eye', witchcraft and healing. These beliefs are not 'mere superstition' but important social tools. Bonvillain (2007:287) describes how the egalitarian *Ju/'hoansi* healers in their hunter/gatherer societies get social prestige as healing is a domain of personal and social significance. Religious practice also affects gender relations by allowing or restricting men's and women's ability to function as ritual practitioners. Barring women from ritualist activities blocks them from achieving a respected social status and receiving social prestige (2007:12).

The female spiritual leader depicted in *Avatar* is a positive example of female empowerment and important to counter the prevalent patriarchal structures in communal African-kin groups. These are characterised by a great deal of interdependence and the individual locates identity within the group (the concept of *ubuntu*: a person is a person through other persons). The community takes precedence over the individual and this community includes both the living and the dead (as shown in *Avatar*, *Dances With Wolves* and *Spirited Away*). To assist the successful completion of the cycle of life, ancestors assist as guides. They represent moral forces and require that their descendants observe a moral code (Beyers and Mphahlele 2009:2). By ignoring the ancestors one demonstrates arrogance and self-reliance for the journey of life. The ancestors function as a social conscience of a community.

There are negative aspects to this kind of spirituality as shown by Phiri (in Ruether 1996:119) who studied the rain-making shrines of the Chisumphi cult in Malawi, and concluded that traditional discrimination against women and cultural disruption prevent these traditional practices from serving as an environmental ethic. However, in spite of the negative aspects an inspiring example of ecumenical co-operation is M.L. Daneel's work in Zimbabwe: here the African Indigenous Churches initiated a programme of tree-planting in cooperation with traditional healers, living an 'earth keeper's ethic' (Ruether 1996:126).

The African Indigenous Churches in Southern Africa include about 6 000 movements and have a combined membership of some forty percent of the black religious population that is growing, spanning virtually the whole country (South African Christian Handbook 2007-2008:77).

4.2.7 Faith traditions of indigenous peoples

The films I have discussed have used the faith traditions of indigenous peoples extensively as source material. The spirituality depicted is popularly associated with peoples or societies who are in a good relationship with their life-worlds. The films do not present an accurate or faithful representation of the beliefs, but are no more accurate than documentaries which show a perfect snapshot of some exotic place, people or wild animals. In the same fashion a film is in great contrast to the lived reality of the people depicted as well as that of the viewers, but in the viewing a door can be opened to an understanding of a world where people are part of the 'web of life'. Here I refer to Kourie (in De Villiers *et al.* 2006:24), as mentioned in Chapter II, who points out that spirituality is often seen as being characterised by relationships with things, nature, other people and the Ultimate (in whatever form this is understood), rather than being linked to religious practices. This green spirituality

effects aesthetic appreciation of nature, and embodies the conviction of the connectedness of all things.

The ideal scenario is where, in the lived reality of indigenous peoples, patterns of spirituality (which especially women of the South, as described by Van Schalkwyk 2008:6-23, Ruether 1996 and others, are recovering) stem from their own indigenous roots. They are not fetched in as an idealised story from long ago and far away with which one has no cultural experience, but rather as being experienced in the present. These are not spiritualities of a “lost Eden” (Ruether, 1996:7), as they also preserve patterns that are harmful. Ruether stresses that we (from a Western context) must question our urge to imagine we can jettison our own reality by appropriating the ideas and practices of indigenous peoples to save us.

4.2.8 Summary

Religious and secular environmentalists over a wide spectrum have expressed concern for nature. Globally, the same misguided ideas and values destroy nature and oppress human beings and therefore the prophetic voices of faith traditions can join with secular environmentalists and political movements to call for reform and action. Religious environmentalism does not call for moral vision where none exists; it offers alternatives to ones that exist at present. The question is: are the world’s faith traditions able to muster sufficient moral power and vision to turn the tide, to show a path out of the downward spiral of environmental degradation? Indeed can faith traditions really make a difference? From the discussion above it is clear that although there are positive trends, this will require nothing less than a transformation of each tradition (preferably in terms of own heritage and particularity).

The spiritualities that are offered in the films are perhaps pale versions of what each of the faith traditions can offer, yet these are often the only encounters the person on the street will ever have. In Western societies and especially in Europe, people are reaching adulthood without having ever set foot in a church and discussions with explicit religious content are met with incomprehension (Graeb 2006:289). In the South the drift away from the churches is much slower, but still is a fact (South African Christian Handbook 2007-2008). People are also immersed in a consumer culture with all the evils and good associated with it. Prosperity gospel and its variants in other faith traditions are becoming increasingly attractive. In the process of meaning-making films are important and will continue to flourish, and the experience of receiving major portions of information from a two-dimensional source will most likely influence how we experience spirituality.

4.3 A 'GREEN SPIRITUALITY' AS PART OF OUR WORLDVIEW

Theological reflection informed by a green spirituality and embracing an ecological ethic needs to accomplish several symbolic shifts. One of the symbolic shifts involves a shift in humankind's view of reality. An important element is the reshaping of our dualistic concept of reality as split between soulless matter and transcendent male-identified consciousness. There is no distinction based on such dualisms in the new reality. We also need to embrace our actual reality as latecomers to the planet. The world of nature, plants and animals existed billions of years before we came on the scene. Nature does not need us to rule over it, but ran itself very well and better without humans. However, this does not mean an individualistic mystical deep ecology understanding of the world, but rather as part of it as in 'the body of God'.

Christians in particular need to believe themselves as part of the here-and-now. McFague (1993:102) points out that Christians have not been allowed to feel at home on the earth, with centuries of emphasis on heaven and hell. Secularism has diminished the belief in heaven and hell, but has not replaced it with the feeling of belonging here on Earth. Here the ecumenical community has a vital role to play in confirming that Churches and congregations have to be part of the 'web of life' and be aware of a call to heal. Another way of thinking is expressed by Nyajeka in Ruether (1996:139), who speaks of the Shona *Mutopo* principle that "all in creation is free because it exists. Each and every entity in existence is inherently endowed with a right and freedom to be". In this new reality it is recognised that each and every life-form needs space for its own physical needs as well as the understanding that all exist together in this space.

Modern humankind has now been made aware of the impact of modern living on the environment and most have a vague guilt and desire to do better, but actual lifestyle changes are rare. Therefore it is important to discover and develop ways in which people can be made aware of important issues and to open new ways of thinking. In contrast to apocalyptic messages often portrayed in modern media, a green spirituality offers a more hopeful message, where people can re-connect with a form of spirituality that has been part of humanity's resources through the ages. Modern society has the advantage that such spirituality can be purged of the dark and negative elements, mainly through education and common-sense, and the positive elements retained. These positive elements can give the modern viewer tools with which hope and courage can be generated to address the ecological crisis. In this way theological reflection and praxis can identify these green spiritual elements and by thoughtful and sensitive application, encourage and motivate faith communities to embrace an ecological ethic and persevere in resisting the assault on Earth.

Once the freedom to choose to belong to the Earth is recognised, a worldview can develop in which there “is a sense that each and every being is valuable in and for itself, and that the whole forms a unity in which each being, including oneself, has a place” (McFague 1993:112). This worldview allows deep ecologists, ecofeminists and theologians to unite in reconstructing humanity's current attitudes toward nature and develop ecological ethical resources. A healed relationship with each other and nature requires a new consciousness embracing a green spirituality, in fact an ‘eco-theology’. If ecofeminist theology, deep ecology, liberation theology and the different faith traditions can create one framework of consciousness encompassing God who underlies the evolutionary life process, and God whose compassion defends the poor and the weak, a great step forward towards facing the ecological crisis will have been taken.

4.4 POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Theologians agree that the ecological crisis is a spiritual and cultural crisis. Any response has to be multi-sectoral and multi-pronged to even hope to make a difference. Reformed theologian Conradie (2005a:285) calls for a *metanoia*, a change of orientation, to address the crisis that is inside our hearts. He says that the failure to address the ecological crisis is one of lack of moral vision, imagination, moral character, will and leadership. In fact, as “moral formation typically takes place within faith communities, this implies that it is, at its very core, a religious problem we have to address.” Raising ecological awareness needs to be an essential activity of the faith traditions, churches and spiritual movements, and allows solidarity with environmental movements. It is necessary to create awareness that nature is the ‘new poor’ and along with ‘old poor’, namely impoverished human beings, should be reached out to (McFague 1993:165). The challenge is to seek out those who are nurturing and healing

the earth. According to Wright and Kill (1993:127) many scientists and others working to address the ecological crisis have recognised the spiritual dimensions of the problem: “they call on religious people to provide courageous and joyful leadership”. In this spirit, Conradie (2005a:287) describes four levels of responses to issues:

1. Making a difference where one works, lives and in one's social circle.
2. By co-operating with and supporting existing organisations.
3. By becoming ecologically conscious religious communities.
4. By tackling projects individually and as organisations.

He refers to Cock's call for a ‘rainbow alliance’ where conservationists, environmental justice organisations, labour movements and religious groups should work together (1992:182). Ecological theologies must arise out of a thorough analysis of the social, political and economic dynamics in the world. The SACC publication “*Climate Change – a Challenge for Churches in South Africa*” (2009:40) summarises it neatly: “Religious traditions can offer the mystic motivation and enthusiasm for Earthkeeping projects that no other secular or government initiatives can muster on such a wide scale. Religious traditions can provide what science cannot: they promise not only meaning but also deliverance, healing, comprehensive well-being.”

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this study I asked the following questions:

- What is the nature and content of green spirituality presented in the media, with specific reference to the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki?
- Does a green spirituality have any significance for people today?
- Can a green spirituality serve to develop an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis?
- Does the acknowledgment of a green spirituality require a fundamental paradigm shift in faith communities, and if so, what would this be?
- Can an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis?

Religious and spiritual foundations of society may form the only basis strong enough to serve as a platform from where we can counter today's ecological crisis. These religious and spiritual foundations are present in diverse movements: ecofeminism, deep ecology, liberation theology, eco-theology and in the faith traditions of the world, and I see these being articulated in the mass media as 'green spirituality'. I concur with Jewett (1999:3) who quotes Hansen in saying: "Film has become the medium in which stories are told that tend to be central to the concerns, problems, pre-occupations of society. It is one way in which society reflects upon, communicates with and recognises the meaning of everyday experience, of changes, transformations of the world they live in."

From the data a number of examples of green spirituality present in the sources studied can be seen. The nature of this spirituality is diverse, and is derived from a wide range of spiritualities. Often the films derive the green spiritual themes from Native American and South American Indian spiritualities, as well as Shinto and Buddhist beliefs, embedded in a Christian worldview. In this context it is important to remain aware of the level of media saturation in society today. Not only do we have cinema and television with choices of digital and satellite broadcasting, but the Internet has become a household item for many people. Tied to the media is the ubiquitous advertising that goes with it, leading us to expect certain things, especially convenience and entertainment. These expectations are present in modern quests for meaning which most often centre on the media as resources, often leading to a 'supermarket' style of religious 'shopping'.

However, there is a tension today between the rejection of traditional religious life in favour of individualism and pluralism and the forms of belief that are so represented and those who affirm traditional authority (Taylor 2007:510). For example, in the Christian context, Conradie (2005a:223) cautions theologians to not fall into the trap of trivialisation of religious beliefs, where for the sake of convenience, the sacred is made a consumer item. He says that when the deepest Christian convictions are dissociated from the Christian practices in which they are embedded they cannot lead to changes in behaviour. He suggests instead a deepening of cultural practices and strategies of interpretation. On the other hand, as the viewers of the films discussed are drawn into the narrative and identify with the main characters, they also participate in the main characters' quests to situate themselves in the context of a larger world (Detweiler 2010a:24). The viewers see the characters interacting with their environment and the way this interaction is portrayed can be accessed when the viewers are faced with the reality of daily life. This is not serious spiritual reflection,

as Deacy (2005:26) points out, “serious religious reflection ... does not consist of an identification with a merely transitory ephemeral wish-fulfilment realm, but rather the contradictions and discontinuities of reality are much clearer, and any transformation, ..., is necessarily of a radical and more rudimentary kind”. Yet this superficial reflection is not insignificant or to be discarded in the meaning-making activities of postmodern society.

In the context of the films that I examined, as all of them have been produced for mass media consumption and have as their prime goal entertainment, I believe that it is unnecessary and counter-productive for the purposes of this study to attempt to read a deeper theological meaning than the green spirituality that I have already identified. However, this does not mean that when a viewer leaves the cinema there is nothing gained and his or her experience can be ignored. Deacy (2005:135) stresses that “if a ‘secular’ filmmaker creates a film which is perceived by some audiences to be redolent in theological significances, then, irrespective of the degree to which such an interpretation is alien to that filmmaker’s aims and intentions, the efficacy and integrity of that testimony must not be disregarded.” If therefore, by the exposure to green spirituality, people are moved and adjust their worldview to accommodate a deeper understanding of what it means to live in harmony with nature, a significant paradigm shift can be achieved. Those who are in the process of seeking a deeper meaning in their lives, and who wish to find a spirituality to access in their daily lives, can then refer to this information to continue their search (‘the seekers’ and ‘those on a quest’ according to Wuthnow, 1998, and Roof, 2001, respectively).

The significance of a green spirituality for film viewers today is that the conservation of nature and the search for environmental quality has long been associated with the intellectual elite, as is clearly reflected in the literature survey in this study. However

since the 1960s the environmental movement has become much more broad-based, most likely because the broader community could identify with these issues raised in the media. Those who were moved to be more involved, realised that by being involved in local issues affecting their communities, they could make a difference, a form of ‘grass-roots environmentalism’. This movement (Castells 2004: 182, calls this ‘environmental localism’) challenges the loss of control over space and the lack of priority of actual experiences of local people. The connection between the defence of one's place against the ‘imperatives of flows’, the abstract technical rationality expressed by uncontrolled business interests and indifferent government policies, and the strengthening of economic and political bases of locality, can enable people to stand together to oppose seemingly overwhelming events such as the erection of a nuclear power station or opening of a toxic waste dump. Often these actions have a transitory and spontaneous nature, directly addressing the problem at hand. However, in the context of the global ecological crisis a more sustainable and more deeply rooted action is needed and this is where theologians and faith communities can play a decisive role.

A green spirituality can serve to develop an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis if theologians acknowledge the validity of the green spirituality that people are accessing, and can help people to measure their lives differently. People sense this when contemplating the numinous (or ‘glacial time’ as Castells calls it). Castells (2004:183) compares this sense of time to the merging of oneself with the cosmos and “to sense the stars flowing through our blood”. The anti-nuclear movement opposes nuclear proliferation for this very reason, as the long-term effects of radioactive waste means affecting the health of generations to come, thousands of years in the future. The acknowledgment of a green spirituality requires a paradigm shift in faith communities. In the same way as the film viewer goes through a hermeneutical

experience during the viewing of a film and participates in an interpretive activity that is open to encountering and learning something new (Osmer 2008:23), so also the theologian can experience something new by being open to the significance of this green spirituality. Although Osmer is referring to the theologian's role within the congregation in a Christian context, I think this can be expanded to the theologian's role in the public sphere as well, in any faith community. He says "the interpretive guide must attend carefully to the interpretive activity in which people are already engaged" (2008:24).

The theologian must listen carefully and be willing to analyse and critique the social systems shaping interpretive patterns. Without such an attitude a theologian will be unable to relate to issues people face in their everyday lives. It gives theologians the opportunity to identify and facilitate a dialogue between people and the resources of the faith communities. This kind of leadership is as broad as that found in the secular world, and to this is added another dimension, religious or spiritual leadership. In the Christian context this would mean being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Osmer (2008:27) says that by offering a theology of spirituality the tasks of theologians are fourfold: attending to others, guiding others, helping others and taking risks on behalf of others. In such a manner Christians can become 'green' by a change of consciousness; perhaps all faith traditions can do so as well.

In terms of future research, which this study would like to inform, Tracy (in Browning and Fiorenza 1992:26) points out that theology is a critical mode of inquiry willing to give reasons for its claims. Tracy says there is no lack of critical theory in most forms of public theology but there is a real lack of critical social theory. Critical social theory is a form of self-reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation. A research programme should be informed by critical social theory and

such theory in turn must “be informed by a dialogical, linguistic understanding of reflection rather than a mono-logical philosophy of consciousness” (1992:27). Therefore building on the discussion of this study, a critical social theory would investigate the social mechanisms that have lead to the ecological crisis as well as those that are perpetuating it. A critical social analysis could also investigate why the faith traditions have failed to address the ecological crisis in a meaningful way, and perhaps the roots of this failure lie in the trivialisation of green spirituality by society and orthodox faith traditions, reflecting a tendency to offer a simplified and distorted view of what is happening in civilisation.

Tracy states that it only is possible to understand why the public realm has become so impoverished and why the modern life-world has been taken over by ‘client and consumer identities’, by conducting social analysis. In this sense nuclear protest movements, various liberation movements and the ecological movements, all provide hope by resisting these identities by the listening to the demands of purposive rationality or rational means to rational ends, as well as implicitly affirming the need for communicative action²⁷ (1992:31).

The purpose of this study was to determine whether green spirituality is present in films and whether it could contribute to an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis, which in turn could serve as a platform in a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged response to the ecological crisis. I presented the data, namely the identification and analysis of green spirituality found in popular media such as the films *Avatar*, *Emerald Forest*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and

²⁷ Habermas uses this concept to describe cooperative action undertaken by individuals based upon mutual deliberation and argumentation. He develops the concept in his work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). Communicative action asserts that through systematic discussion, universal truths and codes of appropriate conduct can be uncovered in a way that everyone involved may reach agreement and can benefit from equally.

the films of Hayao Miyazaki. The data was collected through critical evaluation and comparative analysis of these films, referring to the situational and empirical analysis of the present situation through published works.

I determined that green spirituality was present in the films reviewed and that this could lead towards an ecological ethic in theological reflection and praxis as it gives theologians the opportunity to identify and facilitate a dialogue between people and the resources of the faith communities. Postmodern expressions of green spirituality as seen in the mass media have the potential to open up dialogue, free from the fears and restrictions imposed by ignorance and societal taboos, and do not hinder us from access to the 'sacred'.

A well-known theologian expresses this as follows:

"The sacred is always there... sometimes we see it clearly, sometimes it is hidden from our view. ... [It] calls us to become more sensitive to the ways in which the sacred may manifest itself in contemporary society. Religious sentiment does not simply wax and wane; it changes clothes and appears in garb to which we are sometimes unaccustomed. It may well be all around us, and yet we have not trained ourselves to recognise it" (Wuthnow 1992:4).

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